

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How regime legitimation influences Vietnam's strategy toward US–China strategic rivalry

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Abstract

Vietnam has tried to maintain a delicate balance between the United States and China by pursuing a hedging strategy. In a shifting strategic environment marked by structural uncertainty caused by the rise of China, weaker Southeast Asian states like Vietnam are projecting a non-alignment posture. However, this rational behavior is not the product of systemic factors alone but also certain domestic political dynamics. We argue that regime legitimation – how the Vietnam Communist Party seeks to generate and sustain internal and external legitimacy – weighs heavily on Vietnam's strategy toward US–China competition. In particular, three legitimation strategies employed by the Vietnam Communist Party – performance-based legitimation, nationalism-based legitimation vis-à-vis China, and defensive legitimation vis-à-vis “hostile forces” – produce dynamics that ensure Hanoi does not get inadvertently pulled into the orbit of either Beijing or Washington. Theoretically, this article contributes to the literature on domestic determinants of foreign policy with a focus on regime legitimation. Empirically, we seek to supplement the discussion on the salience and relevance of domestic politics in informing Southeast Asian states' strategic calculation amid great-power competition.

Keywords: Hedging strategy; regime legitimation; US–China competition; Vietnam–China relations; Vietnam–US relations

Introduction

Since the late 2000s, China's maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea has caused considerable anxiety for Vietnamese policymakers, precipitating a marked shift in Hanoi's foreign policy in favor of Washington. In 2013, president Barack Obama and his then-Vietnamese counterpart, Truong Tan Sang, launched the “US–Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership.” Building on that foundation, in 2015, the two former Cold War foes issued a Joint Vision Statement on Defence Relations, laying the foundation for deepening defense ties. Since then until 2019, Washington authorized the permanent export of more than \$32.3 million in defense articles to Vietnam and registered over \$162 million in active Foreign Military Sales with Vietnam.¹ Vietnam and the United States have gradually strengthened maritime security cooperation, given their shared concerns over China's expansionist moves at sea. The two have jointly expressed support for freedom of navigation and the rule of law in the South China Sea while noting unlawful actions at sea,² which implies China's moves to exert dominance in the South China Sea. Notably, Vietnam has been a key recipient of US maritime capacity-building assistance that aims to enhance US partners' maritime domain awareness and ability to

¹Bureau of Political-Military Affairs 2020.

²Office of the Press Secretary 2017.

protect their waters.³ Vietnam has hosted two US aircraft carriers, the USS Carl Vinson in 2018 and the USS Theodore Roosevelt in 2020.

From a balance of power perspective, Vietnam's tilt toward the United States is not surprising. The traditional International Relations (IR) scholarship on state strategy in the face of a hostile rising power centers around two options: *balancing* (allying with another power or other countries through military alliances to contain a prevailing threat) or *bandwagoning* (deferring to the larger adversarial power in exchange for protection, political, and economic benefits).⁴ Based on this theoretical framework and the evidence presented above, one could surmise that Vietnam is poised to militarily align with the United States to balance China's increasingly belligerent posture. That said, the notion that Hanoi would simply rely on an external security guarantor to protect itself from an external threat ignores the country's nuanced and sophisticated strategy for coexisting with its giant neighbor.

This paper posits that regime legitimation – how the VCP justifies and sustains its authority as the sole ruling party of Vietnam – weighs heavily on Vietnam's strategy toward US–China competition. In particular, we argue that legitimation strategies employed by the VCP produce dynamics that ensure that Hanoi does not get inadvertently pulled into the orbit of either Beijing or Washington. In a 2021 interview, former deputy minister of national defence, senior lieutenant general Nguyen Chi Vinh said: “Don't think that [...] having tensions with China would win American support, or closing our doors to the US would make China talk to us less harshly.”⁵ He also once said that “No one or no country can force us to choose sides.”⁶ Senior lieutenant general Vinh's statements reflect Vietnamese leaders' desire to eschew either pure balancing or pure bandwagoning due to the perceived strategic flaws of each option. From Vietnam's perspective, staying in the middle makes the most strategic sense. In fact, throughout history, Vietnam's China strategy has always been a mixture of both deference and resistance.⁷ In contemporary policy language, this approach is labeled as “cooperation and struggle” (*vừa hợp tác vừa đấu tranh*). The principle implies that Vietnam takes a firm stance against countries that harm its national interests and sovereignty (“struggle”) but remains cordial with them in areas of mutual interests (“cooperation”).⁸ This framework guides Vietnam's interactions with not only China but also the United States, and thus Hanoi's warming ties with Washington should also be seen through this dichotomy. Notwithstanding enhanced defense cooperation with the United States, Vietnamese leaders continue to uphold the longstanding “three-nos” defense policy (no joining military alliance, no hosting of foreign bases on Vietnamese soil, and no aligning with one country against another) as part of its “cooperation and struggle” policy.

In IR terms, Vietnam is pursuing a hedging strategy.⁹ While there are multiple definitions of “hedging,” in essence, the strategy occupies a middle ground between balancing and bandwagoning. Hedging enables countries to cope with uncertainties in a great power's behavior using various policy tools that, while helping promote bilateral cooperation, also prepare themselves for potential security threats posed by that power.¹⁰ Most scholars contend that Southeast Asian countries generally adopt a hedging strategy in managing their relations with China.¹¹ Thi Bich Tran and Yoichiro Sato observe several systematic factors that make this approach suitable and ideal for small states like Vietnam.¹² First, structural uncertainty caused by the growing rivalry between China and the United States

³From 2017 to 2021, the United States provided a total of around \$80 million in funds State Department's to help Vietnam enhance its maritime security/domain awareness capacity. The United States has handed over twenty-four Metal Shark fast patrol boats and two decommissioned coast guard cutters to the Vietnam Coast Guard. See Bureau of Political-Military Affairs 2020.

⁴Walt 1986, p. 110.

⁵To 2021.

⁶Hoang Thuy 2020.

⁷Path 2018.

⁸Thayer 2016.

⁹Kuik 2016; Le 2013; Tran and Sato 2018.

¹⁰Le 2013, p. 337.

¹¹Goh 2008; Kuik 2016.

¹²Tran and Sato 2018, p. 79.

necessitates a degree of strategic flexibility by weaker nations to manoeuvre the fallout from great power competition and retain their autonomy. Second, the close proximity between Southeast Asian countries and China inevitably links them in various aspects, paving the way for robust commercial exchanges and economic cooperation. Third, proximity to China also translates into a sense of insecurity for Southeast Asian countries, especially those that are more skeptical of Beijing due to the South China Sea dispute. Finally, the presence of the United States and other major powers like Japan, Australia, and India in the region has been perceived a counterbalance to China's growing dominance and influence. In light of these conditions, Southeast Asian policy makers tend to pursue policies that aim to maximize returns through economic and diplomatic ties with China while concomitantly cultivating countervailing forces and planning for contingencies vis-à-vis China by enhancing ties with Beijing's rivals. However, each country's adoption of hedging is not the product of systemic factors alone but also certain unique domestic political dynamics. In the case of Vietnam, scholars have examined several internal developments that influence Vietnam's current foreign policy approach toward China and the United States. Examples include Vietnam Communist Party (VCP)'s performance-based legitimacy,¹³ nationalist sentiments,¹⁴ communist rule and political affinity with China, and elite factionalism within the VCP.¹⁵

These studies mostly examine exclusively *internal* legitimacy – domestic audience's acceptance of a regime's political authority. Following recent works on the relationship between regime legitimation and its international activities, we apply a more holistic view of legitimacy that comprises in addition to the *internal* dimension, the *external* dimension. This conceptualization allows us to delineate the role of regime legitimation in shaping Vietnam's strategy toward US–China rivalry more comprehensively compared to previous scholarly works. Theoretically, this paper contributes to the literature on domestic determinants of foreign policy with a focus on regime legitimation. Empirically, we seek to supplement the discussion on the salience and relevance of domestic politics in informing Southeast Asian states' strategic calculation amid great power competition.

This article is divided into three main sections. The section following this introduction presents the two modes of legitimacy – internal and external legitimacies – and the concept of legitimation. The subsequent section delves into three legitimation strategies that have been employed by the VCP since the *Doi Moi* economic reform in 1986: performance-based legitimation, nationalism-based legitimation vis-à-vis China, and defensive legitimation vis-à-vis “hostile forces.” The third part examines how these legitimation dimensions interact with each other and affect Vietnam's relations with China and the United States.

Two types of legitimacy and legitimation

Internal and external legitimacy

Notwithstanding the VCP's centralized system of political control and its autocratic politics, regime legitimacy remains essential insofar as it allows the VCP the moral high ground to justify its rulership. *Legitimacy* is a key concept in political philosophy and a crucial dimension of state capacity. Generally, the term refers to the right of a leader, institution, or regime to govern. Martin Seymour Lipset posits that “legitimacy involves the capacity of the system to maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society.”¹⁶ Similarly, Max Weber explains legitimacy in terms of citizens' acknowledgment of an obligation to obey the leader.¹⁷ In both definitions, legitimacy only exists if the ruled accepts the ruler's authority.

Existing studies of regime legitimation in authoritarian polities suggest that these governments take seriously the need to obtain support and to create a following among their citizens. They

¹³Thayer 2017.

¹⁴Le 2013; Liao and Dang 2019; Thayer 2017.

¹⁵Do 2021; Le 2013.

¹⁶Lipset 1981, p. 77.

¹⁷Weber 1974.

also engage in justifying their rule through politicization, be it through religion, ethnicity, or political ideologies, and have demonstrated their durability and cohesiveness in spite of criticism.¹⁸ Leslie Holmes proposes the following sources of legitimacy: *old traditional* (e.g., the mandate of heaven); *charismatic*; *goal-rational* (leaders professing the right to rule by their knowledge of the best path toward an end-goal); *nationalism* (patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric, protection of national sovereignty); *new traditional* (e.g., leaders reinventing old traditions to legitimize their own policies and rules); *performance-based* and *legal-rational*.¹⁹ *Performance-based* legitimacy is about the regime's "effective use of power to promote the collective interest of the community."²⁰ Unlike well-established democracies where incompetent governments could be voted out by the electorate (legal-rational legitimacy), illiberal democratic or authoritarian polities, due their lack of capacity for effective self-renewal, capitalize on effective performance in enhancing the quality of life of the people to justify their hold on to power.²¹ It is arguably the single most crucial source of legitimacy for ruling communist parties.²² Under this type of legitimacy, the regime delivers generous social welfare benefits (such as high living standards, security in employment, and free and accessible health care) in exchange for the public's acceptance of the ruling party's authority. Another study of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which the VCP models itself upon, also shows the importance of ideology and how it is being deployed as a set of practices and incentives for the proper performance of the political elite.²³

The other dimension of legitimacy is *external legitimacy* or international legitimacy – a regime's right to have its domestic affairs free from outside interference, both from state and non-state actors.²⁴ Heike Holbig argues that regimes of all types need to legitimize their rule not only in the national but also international realm, particularly when they seek involvement in the global economy and global platforms or participation in international cooperative mechanisms that aim to address global problems.²⁵ He also notes that due to globalization and increased interactions among states, emphasis on national sovereignty and rejection of foreign interference into internal matters have also become important for states in defending their political model. Acts of foreign interference include both forceful behaviors such as military intervention, cyberattacks, or election meddling and milder forms of infringement, such as international criticism or economic sanctions.

Holmes identifies three sources of external legitimacy: *formal recognition* (by other states and/or international organizations), *informal support* (of other countries which express approval of a regime's leadership and governance style), and *external role-model* (of a regime that is confident in its right to rule because it is following the approach of a country or a set of countries worthy to be considered as role-model).²⁶ The following examples will help elucidate the differences between these three types of external legitimacy. Formal recognition is an essential question for political entities that seek independence. At the time of this writing, 13 countries formally recognize Taiwan.²⁷ On the other hand, those that endorse the "one-China" policy (i.e., acknowledge China's claimed sovereignty over Taiwan) do not formally recognize the government of Taiwan as the ruler of an independent state. Yet, Taiwan often receives informal support from the United States and other liberal democratic states since it is considered a democracy. Notably, in December 2021, president Joe Biden invited

¹⁸Gerschewski 2018, Kailitz and Stockemer 2017.

¹⁹Holmes 2007, pp. 18–19.

²⁰Alagappa 1995, p. 21.

²¹Ibid., pp. 22–23.

²²Le 2012, p. 151; Tannenberget al. 2021.

²³Holbig 2013.

²⁴Paletta 2011, p. 871; Vossen 2012, p. 568.

²⁵Holbig 2011, p. 170.

²⁶Holmes 2007, p. 19.

²⁷Myers 2021.

Taiwan to his “Summit for Democracies.”²⁸ This invitation angered Beijing. Owing to its authoritarian style of governance, Beijing is formally recognized by the United States but not informally supported. During the Cold War, the CCP and the VCP, in their quest for national construction, saw the Soviet Union as an external role-model for economic management. The two communist regimes had confidence that the Soviet model would bring about rapid industrial development and growth for their countries.

Regime legitimation and its relationship with foreign policy

Each political order attempts to justify its rule before its citizens through multiple means and by a constant process of *legitimation*, defined by Christopher Ansell as “dynamics, discourses and strategies by which actors seek and maintain legitimacy, regardless of whether they are successful or not, morally convincing or not.”²⁹ This is because legitimacy is not an end-goal that can be successfully attained but exists in a state of flux. If a legitimate government fails to maintain popular support, it could still be voted out of office today or deposed tomorrow. A certain type of regime which receives formal recognition or even informal support from one country can be considered illegitimate by another.

Several recent studies have examined the relationship between authoritarian regime legitimation and foreign policy. Adele Del Sordi and Emanuela Dalmasso argue that authoritarian polities cultivate external legitimacy to boost their popularity at home by presenting themselves as an internationally praised role models that deserve local support.³⁰ Julia Grauvogel and Christian von Soest observe that international sanctions could be capitalized by non-democratic regimes to reinforce their claims to domestic legitimacy, producing a “rally-round-the-flag” effect that strengthens authoritarian rule.³¹ Bert Hoffman shows that the specific nature of the regime, such as its origins, characteristics, and evolution could affect the form and degree in which the state seeks to draw legitimacy from international sources.³² He proposes two international dimensions of regime legitimation: *defensive* and *expansive* international legitimation strategies. In a *defensive* legitimation strategy, the regime employs strong nationalist and anti-hegemonic claims to oppose an external “other” to appeal to the domestic audience. The regime could also claim to liberate and protect the nation from an external enemy and label domestic opposition proxies of foreign actors. In this sense, defensive legitimation strategy can be seen as form of nationalism-based legitimation. Nationalist rhetoric aimed to boost legitimacy, however, do not necessarily rely on stocking confrontation with a specific external “other” but could simply just extol the regime’s historical and/or present role in defending national boundaries and values. On the other hand, an *expansive* legitimation strategy seeks to court the international community, which can be supported by foreign policy tools, military activities, alliance pacts, ideological or religious credence, or charismatic leadership with an international outreach.

In the case of Vietnam, we argue that three legitimation processes – performance-based legitimation, nationalism-based legitimation, and defensive legitimation – produce the push and pull forces than ensure Vietnam does not veer too far away from China nor lean too close toward the United States. Before analyzing this nexus between regime legitimation and external politics, we will elucidate how the VCP has drawn upon each of the three legitimacy sources to justify its rule.

The Vietnam communist party’s legitimation strategies

Performance-based legitimacy: ensuring socio-economic development

Founded in 1930, the VCP intensified popular nationalist resentment against colonial rule to mobilize the mass in resisting French and Japanese imperialism and declaring independence in 1945.

²⁸Pamuk 2021.

²⁹Ansell 2001.

³⁰Sordi and Emanuela 2018.

³¹Grauvogel and Soest 2013.

³²Hoffman 2011.

Subsequent revolutions against France and America, which ultimately led to the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, further consolidated the VCP's defensive legitimization based on its anti-colonial credence. However, following the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976, this legitimization mode gradually lost relevance. In fact, in the immediate aftermath of reunification, the VCP's ruling credibility was at stake as war-torn Vietnam grappled with economic hardship, exacerbated by unsuccessful attempts at central planning and international sanctions due to Vietnamese troops' presence in Cambodia. To ensure national survival and revitalization of the country, at the Sixth National Congress in 1986, Vietnam decided to embark on economic liberalization under the banner of *Doi Moi* [Renovation]. In the interest of obtaining external assistance for this ambitious national project, the VCP downscaled its once defensive legitimization and began normalization with the United States, China, and the West. Under the new economic model, living conditions improved significantly, and poverty was alleviated. Moreover, Vietnam experienced remarkable growth, maintaining an average rate of approximately 6.8% from 2000 until 2019.³³ Success in economic development following *Doi Moi* gave rise to performance-based legitimacy as the dominant mode of legitimization.³⁴ Today the Party enjoys popular support primarily due to its ability to provide generous socio-economic benefits. Without sufficient revenue and resources, this legitimization strategy cannot be prolonged. Therefore, it is vital that the VCP sustains steady and high economic growth to satisfy its citizens' needs and thereby secure the people's mandate to govern. As Vietnam's former deputy foreign minister Vu Khoan once said: "[D]evelopmental backwardness will reduce the people's belief, cause social problems, and inevitably lead to threats to security, public order and even regime survival."³⁵

Nationalism-based legitimization vis-à-vis China: responding to growing anti-China sentiments

In addition to economic performance, anti-China sentiments are another source for the Party to cushion its rule at home. Owing to Vietnam's complex history of interactions with China, which heavily centers around resisting Chinese aggression and influence, anti-China sentiments undergird Vietnamese nationalism in many ways.³⁶ In the past two decades, China's harassment of Vietnamese vessels, intrusion in Vietnamese waters, as well as growing economic clout in Vietnam has intensified the public's negative views of China. According to the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's State of Southeast Asia 2021 survey, 90.4% of Vietnamese respondents are worried about China's economic influence in their country and 75.4% express distrust toward China.³⁷ Since 2007, there have been frequent anti-China demonstrations protesting against China's assertive behavior in Vietnamese waters and urging the government to take a tougher stance in the South China Sea. Angered at China's intimidation and frustrated at the meek response from the Vietnamese government, a new generation of Vietnamese nationalists have emerged with three main critical narratives: (1) China still has expansionist desires to put Vietnam under its orbit, (2) Vietnamese leaders have capitulated to their Chinese counterparts at the expense of national defense, and (3) domestic political changes are necessary to cope with threats from China.³⁸ The proliferation of the Internet and social media has further empowered anti-China nationalists, allowing them to galvanize popular resentment against China for their causes.

Growing anti-China sentiments have a direct consequence on the VCP's nationalism-based legitimacy. If, in the past, the Party claimed domestic legitimacy upon its leadership in liberating the country from imperial powers, today Vietnamese leaders profess that the VCP's leadership is paramount in the defense of territorial integrity and national sovereignty. Particularly, nationalism, with a focus on

³³World Bank 2020.

³⁴Le 2012; Thayer 2017, p. 190.

³⁵Do 2017, p. 72.

³⁶Vu 2014.

³⁷Seah, Hoang, Martinus and Pham Thi 2021.

³⁸Luong 2021, pp. 8–9.

maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea, serves as an auxiliary revenue for the VCP to bolster internal legitimacy.³⁹ As China is the most assertive actor in challenging Vietnam's claims to the islands and waters in the South China Sea, the Party must demonstrate resolve in dealing with China to ensure the success of its nationalism-based legitimization strategy. Carl Thayer, a veteran scholar of Vietnam's foreign policy, notes that the shift to performance legitimacy under *Doi Moi* has weakened the VCP's monopoly on foreign policy, allowing public opinion, including anti-China sentiments, to exert considerable pressure on policymakers.⁴⁰

Defensive legitimation vis-à-vis “hostile forces”: preserving communist rule from “peaceful evolution”

While the anti-imperialist camp within the VCP's leadership is no longer influential, anti-American and anti-Western sentiments persist as part of regime survivalism. The Party actively forestalls “peaceful evolution,” which alludes to regime change to a Western-style democracy instigated by “hostile forces.” Under the old political thinking prior to *Doi Moi*, the VCP often viewed reactionary individuals, imperialist and capitalist states, and their followers as “hostile forces.” However, under the new foreign policy direction of multidirectionalism in which Vietnam seeks to befriend all nations regardless of differences ideology, the term has been reconceptualized to refer to internal/external individuals or organizations that seek to delegitimize the state and the Party. Still, “hostile forces” are often seen as those sponsored by or with ties to the United States. As a Leninist one-party state operating in a US-led liberal international order that espouses Western democratic norms and values, Vietnam is hypersensitive about interference in its domestic affairs. The VCP equally fears domestic uprisings inspired and emboldened by the West. Thus, it employs a defensive legitimation strategy vis-à-vis the so-called “hostile forces,” promoting counter-hegemonic discourse against the widespread espousal of Western political and human rights values.

There are two main themes in the VCP's counter-hegemonic discourse. First, it often reassures domestic audiences of the Party's legitimate rule and dissuades them from advocating regime change to a multi-party system, which corresponds how the West defines “democracy.” To this end, the Central Propaganda Department – the VCP's propaganda organ – is tasked to reinforce the people's trust in the Party and the government by countering anti-state and anti-Party arguments. For example, an article entitled “Vietnam Does Not Need and Does Not Accept Multi-Party System,” published in the Central Propaganda Department's official journal, asserts that one-party system is the choice of the Vietnamese people and that it can guarantee full democratic participation.⁴¹ The Party often highlights the effectiveness of the one-party system by citing its leadership's role in navigating the nation through various struggles against foreign aggression and toward remarkable achievements. In his speech commemorating the ninetieth anniversary of the VCP, general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong stressed the righteousness of the Party's leadership, as history has shown.⁴² He referred to military victories against the French and Americans and economic development since *Doi Moi*, attributing them to the Party's effective governance and vision. The underlying narrative here is that the VCP is the only political force capable of protecting, governing, and uniting the nation and thus the multi-party model is irrelevant for Vietnam. Arguments that challenge these notions could be labeled as wrongful views and those promoting them are at risk of being seen as unpatriotic or even as reactionary.

Another theme in the VCP's propaganda campaign against peaceful evolution is opposing perceived Western intervention into Vietnam or other countries' domestic affairs. For example, some Party members and the Central Propaganda Department frame popular uprisings against the government in the Middle East during the Arab Spring, Venezuela in 2019, and Cuba in 2021 as instances of

³⁹Le 2012; Thayer 2009.

⁴⁰Thayer 2017.

⁴¹Nguyen 2018.

⁴²Duc Binh 2020.

color revolution backed by the West.⁴³ Vietnam publicly protests against annual reports by Western countries and organizations on its human rights situation. The latter always paint the VCP as a repressive regime. For example, in 2021, following the release of the 2020 Report of International Religious Freedom and 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practice by the US State Department, the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that the information presented in these documents was incorrect and non-objective.⁴⁴ The ministry gave a similar commentary on the 2020 EU Annual Reports on Human Rights and Democracy, which casts a negative light on Vietnam's human rights situation.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, General Secretary Trong has also explicitly expressed his contempt for "liberal democracy" because this governance model has been imposed upon the world by the West and is unable to guarantee the essential features of democracy.⁴⁶ Trong essentially contests the prevailing notion in the international society that liberal democracy is "most legitimate form of domestic governance."⁴⁷

How Vietnam's regime legitimization influences its strategy toward US-China rivalry

Performance-based legitimation: the rise of integrationists and new foreign policy trends that guide Vietnam's relations with big powers

The VCP's shift to performance-based legitimacy after *Doi Moi* produced two dynamics that underlie Vietnam's current hedging posture: (1) the rise integrationists and (2) new foreign policy trends that guide Vietnam's pragmatic and flexible engagement with big powers. First, as Vietnam began opening up to the outside world and prioritizing socio-economic development tasks in the late 1980s, reform-minded leaders or integrationists emerged in the political scene. They advocated greater integration into the Western-led world order to boost national growth, which in turn would strengthen the Party's internal legitimacy.⁴⁸ Their preferred strategy in dealing with China was forging relations with other major powers for deterrence while also shaping China's behavior through interlocking mutual interests. Immediately, they clashed with the more prevalent camp within the Party at that time – anti-imperialists. This group remained highly skeptical of the West (especially the United States), advocating a bandwagoning approach toward China. These conservatives held on to the Cold War mentality that international relations were driven by the fault lines between the socialist and capitalist blocs. Under this perspective, US imperialism was a greater threat than China's expansionism. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, with a strong presence within the VCP's leadership, they constantly obstructed integrationists' attempts to develop relations with the United States and sought a strategic alliance with China.⁴⁹ However, in the past two decades, a combination of internal and external factors has led to the demise of the anti-imperialist camp. Alexander Vuving suggests that China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea, most prominently during the 2014 Oil Rig Crisis when China put the *Haiyang Shiyou* 981 (HD 981) oil rig in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), finally convinced the VCP that China poses the biggest security threat, not the United States.⁵⁰ The diminishing influence of hardliners within the Party can also be attributed to the increasing dominance of integrationists in the decision-making process, propelled by Vietnam's continuous reform and opening since *Doi Moi*.⁵¹ The bottom line is that anti-Westerners are no longer in a position to significantly dictate Vietnam's alignment posture.

⁴³See Dang Cong San Vietnam 2011; Le and Nguyen 2019; Nguyen 2021; Nguyen 2021a.

⁴⁴Bao Chi 2021; Binh Giang 2021.

⁴⁵An Nhien 2021.

⁴⁶Nguyen 2021; Nguyen 2021b.

⁴⁷See, Hobson 2008.

⁴⁸Vuving 2006, p. 821.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Vuving 2021.

⁵¹Do 2017, p. 19; Vuving 2021, p. 19.

Second, the shift to socio-economic performance as the dominant legitimation mode and the accompanying rise of integrationists resulted in two trends in Vietnam's external affairs that guide the country's pragmatic and flexible engagement with great powers: pragmatic economic cooperation with China and multi-directionalism. Under *Doi Moi*, Vietnam focused on improving external relations and attracting foreign resources for its economic revitalization. Owing to its proximity to Vietnam and significant economic size, China naturally became an important partner for Vietnam in this regard. Since normalization in 1991, bilateral trade and investment ties have significantly grown. China is now Vietnam's biggest trading partner, with export–import value reaching a record high of USD 192.2 billion in 2021.⁵²

However, due to the asymmetry in size and development level, the trade imbalance skewed toward China's favor. Vietnam's trade deficit with China increased from USD 189 million in 2001 to a staggering USD 35.3 billion in 2020.⁵³ China is also Vietnam's largest source of imported goods ranging from consumer goods, to chemicals, steel, and machine tools. More importantly, Vietnam relies on China for raw materials essential for the manufacture of its flagship exports. In 2019, imports from China were responsible for 30% of Vietnam's total imports but only 3.9% of China's total exports.⁵⁴ Furthermore, China remains the primary market for Vietnam's agricultural products, a major revenue earner for the country. Any serious disruptions to this trade relationship could spell a huge blow for Vietnam's economy. During the first four months of 2022, Vietnam's exports to and imports from China recorded an 87% and 57% dive respectively, year-on-year, because of tightened border measures by Chinese authorities over COVID-19.⁵⁵ According to a Vietnamese senior official's estimate in 2014, Vietnam's GDP would contract as much as 10% if China decided to cut off trade.⁵⁶ These statistics show that Vietnam's economic growth agenda and ultimately, its performance-based legitimacy is closely tied to China's economy. China's use of economic coercion in maritime disputes, as seen with the banana import restriction against the Philippines in 2012, and how Beijing could easily halt overland trade with Hanoi, has caused Vietnamese policymakers to fear that China could use its economic leverage against Vietnam should bilateral relations sour.⁵⁷ For all these reasons, maintaining pragmatic economic cooperation and good relations with its northern neighbor for the sake of national development has become imperative for Vietnam.

The second trend – multi-directionalism – underlies Hanoi's strategic considerations in dealing with the threats from Beijing. Having embarked on economic reforms in the late 1980s and experiencing declining economic exchanges with the socialist bloc near the end of the Cold War, Vietnam began to diversify its relations to attract external assistance. Politburo Resolution No. 13 (May 1988), entitled “Tasks and Foreign Policy in the New Situation,” paved the way for this goal. The document stated that “economic weakness, political isolation, and economic blockade are major threats to our country's security and independence.” It also emphasized the policy of “more friends, fewer enemies” (*thêm bạn, bớt thù*) and outlined specific actions to end the Cambodia issue and normalize ties with China and the United States, Japan, ASEAN, and Western countries.⁵⁸ In the following decades, Vietnam continuously deepened its international integration and pursued diversified and multi-lateral foreign relations for the purpose of national development, creating the foundation for the country's multidirectional foreign policy. It now has diplomatic relations with 189 countries and territories, strategic partnerships with 17 countries, and comprehensive partnerships with 13 countries.

Nevertheless, broad diplomatic connections are not sufficient in ensuring conducive conditions for Vietnam's continued growth and stability. Since *Doi Moi*, Vietnam has increasingly emphasized the importance of creating a stable and peaceful external environment for the purpose of promoting

⁵²Customs News 2021.

⁵³General Statistics Office 2021, p. 614.

⁵⁴World Bank 2021a, 2021b.

⁵⁵Anh Minh 2022.

⁵⁶Le 2017, p. 109; Zhou 2022.

⁵⁷Do 2021, p. 15; Le 2017, pp. 146–147.

⁵⁸Thayer 2018, p. 25.

national development. Vietnamese leaders acknowledge the need to neutralize sources of regional instability inimical to the country's development path. China's assertive actions, which loom large over Vietnam's security environment, are one of them. In navigating this geopolitical reality, Vietnam utilizes multidirectional foreign policy to shape the regional architecture in its favor.⁵⁹ This involves, *inter alia*, using regional institutions and bilateral mechanisms to curb China's behavior while cushioning other major powers' engagement with the region. The presence of external players, such as the United States and its allies and partners, provides ample opportunities for economic cooperation and countervailing forces that can check China's ambitions. Ultimately, through active diplomacy, Vietnam aims to maximize benefits while minimizing risks to its internal development.

In the past few years, the primacy of integrationists within the Party has allowed multi-directionalism to become salient in Vietnam's overall strategy vis-à-vis China. Former prime minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (2016–2021), a pro-US reformer, once reaffirmed that Vietnam would seek to forge closer economic ties with China while safeguarding its legitimate interests in the South China Sea.⁶⁰ Under his leadership, Vietnam was proactive in reaching out to the United States with the hope of deepening trade and security ties. Hanoi also strengthened relations with other major economies to both further enhance the country's growth prospects and pivot away from China's economic influence. Notably, Vietnam inked the multilateral Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2018 and a landmark free trade agreement deal with the European Union in 2019. It is also a participating member in the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), the economic dimension of the Biden administration's strategy to counter China's influence in the region. Regarding the South China Sea dispute, Vietnam has continued to garner international support against China's maritime assertiveness through ASEAN mechanisms, as underscored by its efforts to bring the issue to the forefront, using its capacity as ASEAN Chair in 2020 and non-permanent member of the UNSC from 2020–2021.⁶¹ Defense cooperation with the Quad nations – the United States, Japan, India, and Australia – continues to expand, focusing on military modernization and maritime capacity-building. Interestingly, Vietnam's recent 2019 Defence White Paper reflects the Vietnamese leadership's attention to risk contingency. It introduces “one-depend” that is, “depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defense and military relations with other countries.”⁶² This inclusion most likely signals the possibility of pursuing greater military cooperation with the United States and other powers if China continues “pushing the envelope” in the South China Sea.

Nationalism-based legitimation vis-à-vis China: diversification of economic sources and preservation of cooperative relations with China

Since China remains a key player in its quest for performance-based legitimacy, the VCP must constantly balance pursuing economic pragmatism and appeasing anti-China sentiments in the country. In 2009, Vietnamese leaders faced the first major incident that prompted them to be cautious of public scrutiny over China-related economic policies: the anti-bauxite movement. Many at that time were unhappy with the government's announcement of a joint venture in which state-owned Chinese companies were permitted to extract bauxite in the strategically important Central Highlands in Vietnam. Then, Vo Nguyen Giap, the legendary general behind Vietnam's victory against France in 1954, wrote open letters to the government to express his concerns. He and other opponents underlined these projects' social and environmental costs as a warning that Vietnam's national security could be undermined by the influx of Chinese migrants and economic leverage.⁶³ The circulation of his letters on Facebook resulted in the recruitment of a national coalition of retired officials, veterans, activists,

⁵⁹Chapman 2017.

⁶⁰Kawase 2019.

⁶¹Nguyen and Nguyen 2020.

⁶²Ministry of National Defense 2019, pp. 23–24.

⁶³Mydans 2009.

journalists, and scientists for an online opposition campaign.⁶⁴ Although the Vietnamese authorities went ahead with the project, as a token gesture to soothe public anger, they fined six Chinese firms for failing to obtain adequate legal documents.⁶⁵ Thayer considers this event “a major challenge to the performance legitimacy” of the then-government as it was the first time a policy on large-scale development projects encountered opposition by such a broad national coalition.⁶⁶ Performance-based legitimacy prevailed this time, but Vietnamese leaders learned that they needed to better calibrate economic cooperation with China to avoid domestic backlash.

Jessica Liao and Ngoc Tram Dang argue that since the 2010s, public concerns over China’s maritime aggression and growing economic influence in the country have provided a push for the VCP to pursue what they term as *economic hedging*: “a cautious calculation over the linkage between security risks and infrastructure partnership and a tendency to pivot away from infrastructure partners deemed risky, namely, China.”⁶⁷ Their study shows that the Vietnamese government has been pivoting away from China and increasingly relying on Japan for aid and infrastructure development. This trend of economic hedging accelerated following the 2014 Oil Rig Crisis, which ignited unprecedented online public discourse concerning Vietnam’s overdependence on China. The topics revolved around complaints about toxic Chinese products and low-quality and environmentally harmful Chinese-funded infrastructure projects.⁶⁸ Even though Vietnamese leaders have expressed diplomatic support for China’s flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), they are also aware of the public’s distrust of China following the 2014 incident and experts’ wariness of China’s “debt-trap” diplomacy.⁶⁹ Thus, the initiative has been received with caution by Vietnam. Another case of Vietnamese elites being cautious of public perception of China-related economic projects was in 2018. Then, Vietnamese took to the streets to protest against a bill on special economic zones that allows foreign businesses to lease land in Vietnam for up to 99 years. While the draft law did not mention China anywhere, protesters believed that it would grant Chinese investors preferential treatment to occupy Vietnamese land. Facing public objections, the National Assembly had to suspend the bill indefinitely.

The most recent episode of nationalistic sentiments affecting foreign policy activities can be observed in the politics of COVID-19 vaccine in Vietnam. The VCP’s performance-based legitimacy was boosted following its success in containing the pandemic in 2020. However, in the latter half of 2021, the VCP’s ability to curb the pandemic was seriously challenged due to rapid infection spikes and a relatively low vaccination rate.⁷⁰ Facing this crisis, Vietnam initiated a “vaccine diplomacy” campaign to promptly secure sufficient vaccines for its population of ninety-eight million from various sources.⁷¹ Relying on China – its immediate neighbor and a global producer of COVID-19 vaccines that had distributed hundreds of millions of doses worldwide – would have been an obvious choice. Despite the approval by WHO and Vietnamese authorities for emergency use, many citizens initially preferred not to be jabbed with Chinese vaccines due to safety concerns.⁷² Analyzing public reactions on social media and mainstream media, Thi Ha Hoang highlights Vietnamese’s acceptance of US-made vaccines – Pfizer and Moderna – and strong aversion to the Chinese vaccine Vero Cell.⁷³ Such attitude was informed by Vietnamese entrenched negative perception of Chinese products and ongoing tension in the South China Sea. The Vietnamese government at first appeared cautious in importing Chinese vaccines. While other Southeast Asian countries embraced Chinese vaccines from the outset to quickly protect their populations

⁶⁴Luong 2021, p. 19.

⁶⁵Thayer 2017, p. 192.

⁶⁶Thayer 2009, p. 52.

⁶⁷Liao and Dang, 2019, p. 669.

⁶⁸Do 2017, p. 213.

⁶⁹Le 2018.

⁷⁰Le 2021.

⁷¹Tuan Minh 2021.

⁷²Radio Free Asia 2021.

⁷³Hoang 2021a.

from the pandemic threat, Vietnam was the last country in the region to accept vaccines from China, receiving a donation of 500,000 Vero Cell doses in June 2021. However, the donation was based upon an agreement that Vietnam would prioritize Chinese nationals residing in the country and Vietnamese wishing to work in China.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, for the general population, Vietnam had focused on developing its home-grown vaccines and utilizing its broad diplomatic connections to gain access to mostly Western and Russian vaccines. By early June 2021, Vietnam had ordered 31 million AstraZeneca doses, 31 million Pfizer doses, 5 million Moderna doses, and 20 million Sputnik-V doses.⁷⁵

In late July 2021, as vaccine supplies were still running short amid the COVID-19 infection spike, the Vietnamese government finally permitted a company to buy five million Vero Cell doses from the Chinese firm Sinopharm. Subsequently, more Vero Cell purchases were made to accelerate the vaccination campaign. As a higher level of public immunity was desperately needed to avert the health crisis, Vietnam could not afford to be picky about its vaccine sources. As prime minister Pham Minh Chinh said in a government meeting in August 2021, “The best vaccines are those inoculated at the earliest.”⁷⁶ To promote public acceptance of Vero Cell usage in the country, the authorities stressed that the vaccine has been adequately inspected and that inoculation of the vaccine is voluntary.⁷⁷

These examples show that rising anti-China sentiments inevitably complicate the VCP’s performance in socio-economic affairs due to China’s support through trade and diplomatic ties. This explains why Vietnamese elites have not adopted a defensive legitimization strategy vis-à-vis China to rally public support. This also explains why in several instances, Vietnam tried to subdue anti-China movements in the interest of maintaining economic cooperation and diplomatic stability with Beijing.⁷⁸ This was most evident during the 2014 maritime standoff. The government initially allowed peaceful anti-China demonstrations, but when violence against Chinese companies and workers ensued, Vietnamese authorities promptly dispersed the protests. Vietnam’s then-prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung warned the public that “bad elements should not be allowed to instigate extremist actions that harm the interests and image of the country.”⁷⁹ When netizens initiated a boycott campaign against Chinese products, a government official labeled it “negative patriotism” and emphasized the need to compartmentalize trade and territorial dispute.⁸⁰ Vietnamese leaders reckoned that overplaying the nationalism card against China might backfire so they channeled popular sentiments into a form of pro-government nationalism by highlighting the need for national solidarity, the role maritime enforcement officers, support for affected fishers, and confidence in the government’s management of the incident.⁸¹ In subsequent protests related to Chinese provocations in the South China Sea, Hanoi also curtailed excessive nationalist expressions to preserve domestic stability and avoid unnecessary escalation with China. As Sebastian Strangio rightly puts it, “nationalistic spot-fires are unwelcome complication for a party and government occupied with maintaining the galloping economic growth that undergirds the legitimacy of communist rule.”⁸²

Defensive legitimization strategy vis-à-vis “hostile forces”: hurdles in furthering security alignment with the United States and maintenance of party-to-party ties with China

Vietnam’s defensive legitimization strategy vis-à-vis “hostile forces” have several implications to Vietnam-US security cooperation, as well as the stability of Vietnam-China relations. Vietnam’s ascendant geostrategic importance amidst China’s expansionism has in part made its external

⁷⁴Liu 2021.

⁷⁵Ministry of Health Portal 2021a.

⁷⁶The Dung 2021.

⁷⁷Hoang 2021b; Ministry of Health Portal 2021b.

⁷⁸Ciorciari and Weiss 2016; Hoang 2019.

⁷⁹Associated Press in Hanoi 2014.

⁸⁰Ha Trang and Trong Trinh 2014.

⁸¹Bui 2016.

⁸²Strangio 2020, p. 77.

legitimacy more secured. In recent years, to justify its strengthening ties with Vietnam, which follows the same ideology with China, the United States has taken steps to recognize and paint the Southeast Asian country as a close and trusted partner, one that is different from other authoritarian states. In 2015, Trong became the first communist party chief to visit Washington, where he was received as the head of state by president Obama. In their joint statement, the two pledged “respect for the United Nations Charter, international law, and each other’s political systems, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.”⁸³ Former US Defense Secretary James Mattis once called Vietnam and the United States “like-minded” partners despite the fact that Vietnam has the same political system with autocratic China.⁸⁴ The United States has also not denounced or sanctioned Vietnam the way it does with communist China over alleged human rights violation.⁸⁵ These US gestures grant the Vietnamese government a certain degree of informal support for its one-party political system.

The deeper bilateral trust as the result of this does facilitate greater defense engagement but will not usher in a mutual defense pact. As Khang Vu points out, as a one-party state, Vietnam’s national security is tied to the security of the VCP.⁸⁶ Hence, Vietnam has historically only allied with countries that it shares both strategic interests and common political values, i.e., China (1954–1975), the Soviet Union (1954–1991), and Laos (1977–present). The latter condition ensures shared mutual respect each other political system, non-interference into each other internal affairs, and shared interest in safeguarding communist rule, all of which serve to guarantee regime security. Thus, despite growing strategic convergence and military cooperation, fundamental ideological differences, *inter alia*, such as Vietnam’s past unpleasant experiences with formal alliances⁸⁷ and its current confidence in its ability to manage tension with Beijing, make a Vietnam-US alliance an unlikely outcome, at least during this time. As a matter of fact, Vietnam’s latent concern over US-backed promotion of Western ideals and values appear to be a hurdle, albeit inconsequential, in the furtherance of Vietnam–US security cooperation. According to some observers, contention over Vietnam’s human rights records is one reason why the two sides have not been able to move from “comprehensive partnership” to “strategic partnership,” which would better reflect the current nature of the relationship.⁸⁸ The elevation of bilateral ties to a “strategic partnership” would also signal greater security alignment toward the United States and could add more substance to the defense and security partnership.

Inherent differences over political values have also contributed Vietnam’s ambivalence toward the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy initiated under the Trump administration. The Indo-Pacific geostrategic conception embraced by the United States and other Quad members is widely seen as a collaborated attempt to shore up the US-led rules-based order in countering China’s growing clout, especially in the South China Sea. From Vietnam’s perspective, the US-led international order is preferable to a China-led alternative, partly because of the threats from China and partly because principles espoused by the American-led system (such as free and open trade, multilateralism, and rules-based order) are largely compatible with Vietnam’s national interests.⁸⁹ However, a central pillar in the US Indo-Pacific vision is governance, which is concerned with advancing democracy and human rights and empowering civil society across the region⁹⁰ – something that the VCP could never endorse.

The value-based pillar of the Indo-Pacific strategy has been invoked in US leaders’ rhetoric to rally its allies and partners against China, something that does not strike a chord with Vietnam. In 2020, Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state under the Trump administration, called for an “alliance of

⁸³Office of the Press Secretary 2015.

⁸⁴K. Vu 2022a.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Vu 2020.

⁸⁷Le 2017, pp. 157–59.

⁸⁸Thayer 2013; K. Vu 2022; P. Vu 2022.

⁸⁹Le 2020, p. 24.

⁹⁰U.S. Mission to ASEAN 2020.

democracies” against China and stated that “communists almost always lie.”⁹¹ While not targeting any other communist regime other than the CCP, Pompeo’s speech reminds Vietnamese leaders of the ideological chasm, an obstacle to deeper strategic trust, that still exists between Hanoi and Washington. The Biden administration has also put greater emphasis on shoring up liberal democracy around the world. In his first foreign policy speech in February 2021, Biden stressed that the United States would work with partners “to support restoration of democracy and the rule of law, and impose consequences on those responsible” and “rally the nations of the world to defend democracy globally, to push back the authoritarianism’s advance.”⁹² Biden then realized this commitment by hosting over one hundred countries for a democracy summit in December 2021; unsurprisingly, Vietnam was excluded. The summit could be seen as a veiled attempt to build a coalition akin to Pompeo’s idea of an “alliance of democracy” against authoritarian China and Russia. When asked about Biden’s democracy summit, Vietnamese spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed that Vietnam “uphold people’s rights to democracy in all aspects of their social life,”⁹³ implying that Vietnam and the United States have divergent views on what constitutes “democracy.” This can also be interpreted as an implicit contestation of American hegemonic discourse on domestic governance in international politics. The US insistence on countering authoritarianism will continue to give conservative leaders in Hanoi grounds to be wary of potential American or Western-inspired peaceful evolution, which justifies the need for Vietnam to keep its distance with the United States. In sum, while Vietnam and the United States are largely aligned strategically, some elements of “struggle” linger in Hanoi’s engagement with Washington due to ideological differences.

On the other hand, Vietnam has full informal support from China as the two countries share similar political systems and ideological underpinnings. It is the endeavor to defend communist rule that binds the VCP with its Chinese counterpart. In the post-Cold War years, while national interests replaced ideology as the guide for both countries’ foreign policy, shared concern for regime security continued to promote party-to-party ties.⁹⁴ The demise of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s prompted fear over the regime survival within VCP. Subsequently, VCP leaders reached out to China in search of an ideological alliance against the West, culminating in the normalization of bilateral relations in 1991. Today, despite tension between the two countries, both ruling parties share the common struggle of protecting their one-party system against peaceful evolution and Western interference. For instance, when Chinese national defence minister Wei Fenghe visited Hanoi in April 2021, Vietnam state media reported that the two countries reaffirmed their political ties and agreed to push back against “hostile forces.”⁹⁵ Meanwhile, the *Global Times*, the mouthpiece of the CCP, reported that Vietnam not only vowed not to align with others to oppose China but also vowed to oppose actions interfering with China’s internal affairs.⁹⁶ Vietnam also often looks at China as an external role model in maintaining political stability and communist rule. Certain domestic policies aimed at consolidating the VCP’s authority are either imported from or have some connection to China.⁹⁷ For example, the anti-corruption campaign led by general secretary Trong since 2016 mirrors president Xi Jinping’s initiative, and Vietnam’s 2019 cybersecurity law bears striking resemblances to China’s version.

In addition, similarities in terms of political structure facilitate frequent interactions between the communist states through party-to-party mechanisms. These include high-ranking visits, hotlines between high-ranking leaders, and annual meetings between the two parties’ Central Departments of External Affairs/Propaganda.⁹⁸ These channels and tools allow Vietnam to directly communicate

⁹¹Pompeo 2020.

⁹²The White House 2021.

⁹³Vietnamnet 2021.

⁹⁴Do 2021, p. 6.

⁹⁵Nhan Dan Online 2021.

⁹⁶Sheng and Deng 2021.

⁹⁷Grossman 2020, p. 19.

⁹⁸Le 2017, p. 168.

its concerns, manage maritime tensions, and promote positive Vietnam–China relations to encourage its northern neighbor to exhibit cooperative behavior. For example, in 2014, when China withdrew the HD 981 oil rig from Vietnam’s EEZ, Vietnamese Politburo member Le Hong Anh, as the envoy of general secretary Trong, attempted to deescalate tension by making a visit to China and informing president Xi of Vietnam’s desire to enhance mutual understanding and trust with China. This was followed by several high-level meetings where the two sides stressed their friendly relations and expressed their desire to restore ties, which helped to stabilize Vietnam–China relations.⁹⁹ In April 2015, three months ahead of his trip to the United States, general secretary Trong hosted president Xi in Hanoi, and they issued a joint communiqué that reaffirmed Vietnam–China bilateral ties. The communiqué states that the two would use bilateral mechanisms to negotiate boundary and territorial disputes and explore the possibility of joint maritime resource exploration.¹⁰⁰ The disputed waters between the two countries witnessed no major standoff until July 2019, when China deployed a survey vessel into waters near Vietnam-controlled Vanguard Bank, resulting in a month-long standoff between coast guards from both sides. During this time, high-level contacts were maintained. One of them was the visit of Politburo member and secretary of the VCP Central Committee Vo Van Thuong to the Chinese province Guizhou, in which he asked China to respect Vietnam’s legitimate maritime rights.¹⁰¹ Vietnam evidently still sees party-to-party diplomacy as a necessary component of its South China Sea strategy.

Conclusion

Vietnam has tried to maintain a delicate balance between the United States and China by upholding its “cooperation and struggle” principle. In this paper, we have underlined how the regime’s internal and external legitimation influences Vietnam’s rationale in pursuing such a strategy by elucidating three dynamics. First, the VCP’s shift to performance-based legitimacy after *Doi Moi* and the accompanying emergence of integrationists led to pragmatic economic cooperation with China and a multi-directional foreign policy. Guided by these two trends, Vietnam strives to maintain good terms with China for economic benefits while developing ties with other major powers in a flexible manner to push back China’s assertiveness, instead of resorting to forging military alliances. Second, in light of public antagonistic attitude toward China, the Vietnamese government has sought to diversify away from China while ensuring that bilateral ties remain cordial for pragmatic economic cooperation. Third, the need to preserve communist rule from peaceful evolution in part compels Vietnam to be careful with its security cooperation with the United States while maintain its political engagement with China. The net result of these dynamics, combined with the structural uncertainty caused by great power competition, is Vietnam’s firm commitment to a hedging posture, albeit more aligned with the United States on maritime security.

In 2021, the VCP underwent leadership succession under the Thirteenth National Congress. However, we should not expect this development to have any major impact on the current trajectory of Sino-Vietnamese and American-Vietnamese relations. The Political Report of the Thirteenth National Congress, which lays out the VCP’s main objectives in the next five years, reaffirms the need to promote international integration, together with multilateralization and diversification of external relations for peace and stability, and economic development.¹⁰² Vietnam will persist in opposing Chinese expansionism and militarized activities in the South China Sea. However, Hanoi will also strive to separate maritime disputes from diplomatic and economic ties with Beijing. Nonetheless, rising anti-China nationalism will complicate Vietnamese leaders’ calculation in this respect. As for relations with the United States, under the Biden administration, we have seen more continuity than

⁹⁹Nguyen and Vu 2018, p. 78.

¹⁰⁰VietnamPlus 2015.

¹⁰¹Vietnam Plus 2019.

¹⁰²CPV 2021.

change. Hanoi has continued to welcome US assistance in maritime capacity building and presence in the region for strategic deterrence against China. As the strategic imperative of checking China's ambitions takes priority, we should not expect US–Vietnam security partnership to turn sour over divergent political values regardless of whether the human rights agenda remains central to US engagement with region or not. At most, such an issue would only continue to be a contributory factor to Hanoi's hesitance in elevating its ties with the United States to strategic partnership. Still, it is possible that Vietnam will do so should its calculation change due to perceived growing threats posed by China's actions in the South China Sea.

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