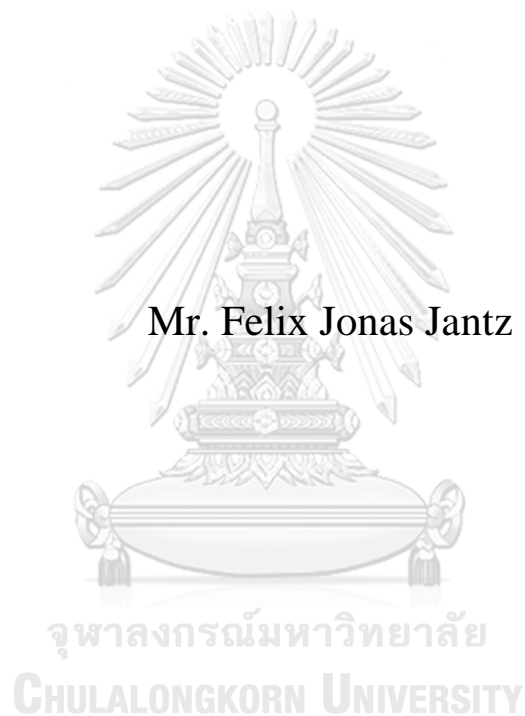


**VIETNAM-INDIA SECURITY RELATIONS:  
EXTRAPOLATING INDIA'S POTENTIAL ROLE IN THE  
MAINTENANCE OF BALANCE OF POWER IN ASEAN**



**Mr. Felix Jonas Jantz**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Southeast Asian Studies  
Inter-Department of Southeast Asian Studies  
GRADUATE SCHOOL  
Chulalongkorn University  
Academic Year 2021  
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ความสัมพันธ์เวียดนาม-อินเดีย: ถ่ายทอดศักยภาพด้านบทบาทของ  
อินเดียในการรักษาดุลแห่งอำนาจในอาเซียน



วิทยานิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต  
สาขาวิชาเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา สหสาขาวิชาเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา  
บัณฑิตวิทยาลัย จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย  
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Thesis Title                   VIETNAM-INDIA  
SECURITY RELATIONS:  
EXTRAPOLATING INDIA'S  
POTENTIAL ROLE IN THE  
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POWER IN ASEAN

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Field of Study                 Southeast Asian Studies

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 ถ่ายทอดศักยภาพด้านบทบาทของอินเดียในการรักษาดุลแห่ง  
 อำนาจในอาเซียน. ( VIETNAM-INDIA  
 SECURITY RELATIONS: EXTRAPOLATING  
 INDIA'S POTENTIAL ROLE IN THE  
 MAINTENANCE OF BALANCE OF POWER IN  
 ASEAN) อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก : ดร.ทรายแก้ว ทิพากร

วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้ได้ตรวจสอบสาเหตุและวิธีของความสัมพันธ์  
 ด้านความมั่นคงระหว่าง  
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 ต อ บ ส น อ ง ต อ ฎ ม ิ ท ศ น์  
 ทางภูมิรัฐศาสตร์ที่เปลี่ยนแปลงไปของอินโดแปซิฟิก เนื่องจาก  
 เวียดนามเป็นรัฐอาเซียนที่มีส่วนร่วมอย่างลึกซึ้งที่สุดกับศักยภาพของ  
 อินเดีย ในการเป็นหุ้นส่วนด้านความมั่นคงระดับภูมิภาค วิทยานิพนธ์  
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 พัฒนาความสัมพันธ์ด้านความมั่นคงที่ลึกซึ้งกว่ารัฐอื่นๆ ในภูมิภาค  
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 ใจของพันธมิตรทั้งสองที่จะร่วมมืออย่างลึกซึ้งยิ่งขึ้น ความก้าวหน้าของ  
 การจัดการด้านความมั่นคงทวิภาคีจะได้รับการวิเคราะห์ ทั้งในแง่ของ  
 ระดับการทูตที่พวกเขามีส่วนร่วมและขอบเขตของความร่วมมือที่  
 เ ก กิ ด ชี น  
 จริง อีกทั้ง ยังได้สรุปเหตุการณ์โดยการประเมินว่าการเป็นหุ้นส่วน  
 ระหว่างอินเดียบกับเวียดนามส่ง ผลต่อดุลอำนาจในภูมิภาคที่กว้างขึ้น  
 อย่างไร

สาขาวิชา	เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียง	ลายมือชื่อนิสิต
ชา	ใต้ศึกษา	.....
ปี	2564	ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาหลัก
การศึก		.....

## 6388526620 : MAJOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES  
 KEYWORD Vietnam-India, Security Cooperation, Indo-Pacific,  
 RD: ASEAN-India

Felix Jonas Jantz : VIETNAM-INDIA  
 SECURITY RELATIONS: EXTRAPOLATING  
 INDIA'S POTENTIAL ROLE IN THE  
 MAINTENANCE OF BALANCE OF POWER IN  
 ASEAN. Advisor: Saikaew Thipakorn, Ph.D.

The thesis examines why and how Vietnam-India security relations have deepened significantly in reaction to the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

As Vietnam has to date been the ASEAN state that has engaged most deeply with India's potential to be a regional security partner, the thesis focusses on ascertaining the factors that have led these two countries to develop a deeper security relationship than other states in the region. Following the analysis of the big geopolitical shifts that drive the two partners' willingness to cooperate more deeply, the progression of bilateral security arrangements is analyzed, both in terms of the diplomatic tier that they are engaging on and the extent of realized cooperation on the ground. The thesis then concludes by evaluating some of the obstacles and limits that affect this bilateral from reaching its full potential for insulating Vietnam against the pressures of polarized big-power competition.

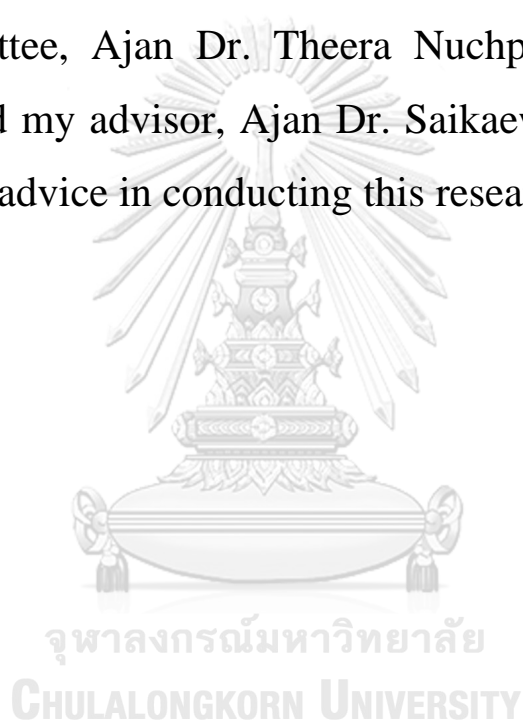
Field of Study:	Southeast Asian Studies	Student's Signature
Academic Year:	2021	.....
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the Southeast Asian Studies Program at Chulalongkorn University for the thought-provoking lectures and the organizational support of the program staff.

In particular, I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Ajan Dr. Theera Nuchpiam, Ajan Dr. Jaran Maluleem and my advisor, Ajan Dr. Saikaew Thipakorn for their guidance and advice in conducting this research.

Felix Jonas Jantz



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## MAIN TEXT

### 1. Introduction

Painfully aware of the need to avoid instrumentalization by big outside powers after the experiences of colonialism and the Vietnam War, Southeast Asian nations have experienced the “ASEAN Miracle”, a time of relative stability and socio-economic development facilitated by the rise and central role of the region’s multinational organization, ASEAN.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as the big power competition between China and the US plus its allies is heating up, ASEAN is increasingly struggling to withstand the shearing forces exerted by this competition and to present a strong and unified position that protects the interests of smaller regional stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> While the continued affirmation of ASEAN centrality remains a staple of any announcements that concern the region, there has been an increasing interest to find venues that are more agile and suitable to address the challenges brought about by ASEAN’s lack of unity, particularly with respect to the sensitive field of security. The present thesis investigates the bilateral relations of India and Vietnam from a security perspective to establish how the shifting regional context is shaping their bilateral cooperation. This includes an examination of the present extent of security cooperation as well as the obstacles that currently inhibit an even deeper partnership. This matter is of broader interest as the basic dynamic that has been bringing India and Vietnam into an ever-closer partnership applies to other regional nations that see their interests and self-determination challenged by US-China bipolarity.

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<sup>1</sup> See (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017), which is titled “The ASEAN Miracle”.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 608 f. (Kraft, 2017).

The three core objectives of the thesis are the following: Firstly, and most centrally, to understand the security cooperation between India and Vietnam by investigating the drivers behind it and the specific form that their bilateral partnership has taken in this field. Secondly, based on this investigation of the India-Vietnam bilateral, to evaluate the potential as well as the limits of these countries' relationship for paving the way for broader ASEAN-India security cooperation. Thirdly and relatedly, to determine the impact of India on the balance of power in ASEAN.

These three core objectives when taken together, yield the result that in a geopolitical environment in which ASEAN is increasingly polarized by big power competition, the deepening bilateral defense relations between India and Vietnam point to the possibility of ASEAN member states strengthening their self-determination by moving closer to India and each other thereby increasing their resilience relative to the mounting tensions between China and the US. The potential of India to play a leading role in such a trend is suggested by its history in the non-alignment movement, its growing geopolitical weight and the congruent interests that India and much of ASEAN hold in avoiding getting caught up in divisive big power competition.

In building to this conclusion, the thesis unfolds in the following steps: It begins by laying out structural realism and the related balance of power thinking which is used as a conceptual framework throughout the thesis to assess the drivers behind states' actions in international relations. The thesis then gives a brief justification for its choice to put the India-Vietnam bilateral at the heart of this investigation. In accordance with the employment of a structural-realist approach, chapter three focuses on the shifting balance of power in the region, which has gone hand in hand

with the emerging big power competition between China and the US. To make this broad and multidimensional phenomenon more concrete and to narrow it down to the dimension of security, the thesis picks two focal points to make regional big power competition more concrete, namely assertive Chinese behavior in the South China Sea and the US-led reaction in the form of the promotion of the 'Free and Open Indo Pacific' as well as the so-called minilateral efforts of the Quad and AUKUS. Chapter four then narrows down the scope of investigation and focuses on India's development as an emerging actor in Southeast Asia, sketching its evolution from its history in the Non-aligned Movement to its growing role as a partner to Southeast Asia and an actor in region affairs. India's evolving understanding of its national interest throughout this time is also documented. In chapter five, we turn to Vietnam as an incipient middle power in Southeast Asia. A close reading of its official Defence White Papers serves as an important source to understand the internal and external drivers of Vietnam's national interests. A look at the currently available forums for security initiatives, most importantly the Quad, then shows that Vietnam's interest for bilateral security cooperation with a partner like India is built on the dual foundation of converging interests on the one hand and a lack of viable alternative venues on the other. Chapter six then moves on from exploring the drivers that bring India and Vietnam together, to investigating the concrete form that their security partnership has taken by going through its successive manifestations in both the sphere of diplomatic ties and hands-on material military cooperation. This is followed by an assessment of likely future steps to further deepen this bilateral relationship's security component, as well as the obstacles and limitations that is facing. In a last step, the points elaborated throughout these chapters are taken together to answer the questions of whether the

India-Vietnam bilateral can act as a starting point for increased India-ASEAN security cooperation and how India's partnership with Vietnam is affecting the broader balance of power in the region.

## **2. Conceptual Framework and Choice of India-Vietnam Relations**

With the objectives of the present thesis thus clearly stated, this chapter lays out the conceptual framework that is used in coming to an answer to these questions. Beyond that, it also explains the reasons for choosing this specific pair of nations as the central focus of the investigation.

This inquiry into the drivers and the potential impact of India-Vietnam security relations takes the national interests of the countries concerned to be the main drivers of their actions, in particular their interest in improving their national security as a prerequisite of achieving their further national goals. The investigation hence gives priority to a realist perspective, as such an approach is most suitable for capturing the dynamics that have been set in motion in the Indo-Pacific by China's steep rise in power. Centrally focusing on a realist perspective implies that other takes on international relations, such as liberalism or constructivism, which might put greater focus on the role of international law or the role of ideology and culture are mostly left out. However, following realism in giving priority to questions of power and the pursuit of national interests does not mean that other factors will be completely left out of the picture. For example, in considering the importance of India's leading role

in the Non-aligned Movement for making it a suitable security partner to Vietnam, the thesis does also take into account the role of trust in international relations.

With realism being a broad school of thought, further clarification on which specific strand of realism will be employed is in order. Classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau are often portrayed as deriving power's central role in international relations from human nature and our supposedly innate drive for domination. While it is a matter of contention whether that is an accurate reading of Morgenthau's position, any theory of international relations that takes a certain conception of human nature as its starting point suffers from the major drawback that the spectrum of human behavior is too diverse to serve as a solid theoretical foundation.<sup>3</sup> Considering for example the comparison between a devout monk and a mass murderer. Both are undeniably human, yet they behave in completely opposite ways in many situations. It is therefore unclear which of the two we could take as a representative of human nature and by extension as a reference point of building a theory of international relations. For that reason, a valid realist theory needs to base the preeminence of power and security considerations on a more robust foundation.

American scholar Kenneth Waltz has put forth structural realism as an answer to this challenge.<sup>4</sup> His theory takes the very structure of the international system to be the central foundational fact that conditions the conduct of nation states. The system's crucial characteristic that Waltz identifies is the "anarchy" that holds true in the

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<sup>3</sup> See p. 137 ff. (Little, *The Balance of Power in Politics Among Nations*, 2007) for a more sympathetic reading of Morgenthau that undermines the ascription of simplistic and biologicistic foundations to his position.

<sup>4</sup> See his (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979) for his original presentation of structural realism.

relations between nations.<sup>5</sup> Anarchy here refers to the fact that there is no higher authority, such as a hypothetical world police, that nations could turn to in resolving their problems or in rescuing them when they come under attack.<sup>6</sup> Anarchy and the lack of higher governing institutions implies that nations' concern for their survival trumps all other concerns, as it is their necessary precondition: "In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power."<sup>7</sup>

For Waltz, the fact of anarchy leads to two further constants in international relations, namely each nation's need to rely on "self-help" and "power balancing".<sup>8</sup> Self-help denotes the necessity for sovereign states to rely on their own resources in ensuring their national security and the protection of their interests. Again, as there is no efficient authority to turn to when being wronged, nations need to secure their goals either through strengthening of their own power potential or through joining with like-minded partners in order to aggregate their powers of assertion. This dual nature of self-help is directly connected to the third constant of the structural realist's view of international relations, namely power balancing. According to this tenet, nations will react to what they perceive as another nation's excessive relative power by seeking to put it in check. As Waltz puts it, "international politics abhors unbalanced power" and relatively weaker nations are hence under pressure to seek ways of mitigating the impact of bigger powers through undermining their source of power and closing the

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<sup>5</sup> P. 5 (Waltz, *Structural Realism after the Cold War*, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> While the UN does exist as an intergovernmental organization with a global scope, it does not function as a fully independent world government, and it certainly does not have the power resources to effectively control the actions of its member countries. Anarchy in Waltz's sense thus continues to exist in spite of UN efforts at implementing a norms-oriented order around the globe.

<sup>7</sup> P. 126 (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

relative power gap by association with each other or any other available means.<sup>9</sup> Under Waltz's theory we thus "expect states to behave in ways that result in balances forming", because such equilibria are the result of all states maximizing their chances of survival under the condition of anarchy and while relying on self-help.<sup>10</sup>

While the theory was initially developed during the time of the Cold War, Waltz argues convincingly that the basic assumptions on which it is built persist fundamentally unchanged in spite of the major shifts that the global order has seen since the collapse of the Soviet Union and American preeminence in international affairs.<sup>11</sup> With China mounting an increasingly comprehensive challenge to American unipolarity, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, the relevance of structural realism as a helpful framework is arguably only increasing as we are moving back to a more competitive global order.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth pointing out that the importance accorded to the state of anarchy does not imply that structural realists are committed to seeing international relations as consisting in a continuous war of all against all where threats and application of force are constants. Instead, it is compatible with military and economic power shaping international relations indirectly, through the rules and norms of behavior that nations follow according to their relative position within institutionalized mechanisms. What realism of this kind is committed to however, is that the order upheld by such norms

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<sup>9</sup> P. 28 (Waltz, *Structural Realism after the Cold War*, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> P. 125 (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> See p. 5 ff. (Waltz, *Structural Realism after the Cold War*, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> See (Walt, *US Grand Strategy after the Cold War: Can Realism Explain it? Should Realism Guide it?*, 2018).

and rules is ultimately shaped and upheld by the underlying material power in military and economic terms.<sup>13</sup>

A potential obstacle for the fruitful application of a realist framework for the purposes of the current investigation is the theory's preoccupation with big powers. As Waltz writes: "In international politics, as in any self-help system, the units of greatest capability set the scene of action for others as well as for themselves".<sup>14</sup> Neither India nor Vietnam can contend with the US, China or Russia in terms of big power status and hence neither of them will be among the prime drivers of the global balance of power. And yet, realism and theorizing informed by a balance of power approach can help explain their interaction in two important ways. Firstly, while they are not themselves major players in the global balance of power, their foreign policy choices are strongly influenced by the prevailing balance between big powers – most importantly China and the US – and hence the theory is informative for understanding the pressures they are facing. Waltz put this point as follows: "To focus on great powers is not to lose sight of lesser ones. Concern with the latter's fate requires paying most attention to the former."<sup>15</sup> The upshot here is that the balance of power that is determined by the relative constellation of big powers constitutes the background against which smaller nations must position themselves. Secondly, there is also the issue of regional scope. Neither India nor Vietnam comes anywhere close to the weight of the US or China on the global stage, however, when narrowing down on the Indo-Pacific region, their relative importance grows considerably. To be sure, even in this region, India and Vietnam stand far behind the US and China in shaping the

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<sup>13</sup> See p. 37 (Reus-Smit, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> P. 72 (Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> P. 73 (Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 1979).



balance of power, yet, as the thesis will argue, their role as potentially valuable partners, together with their congruent national interests makes them a factor in the regional balance of power that neither the US nor China can afford to ignore.

Taking these two aspects of how India and Vietnam interact with the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific into consideration clarifies the motivation for the thesis's structure: First, an investigation of the big-power competition in the region will set the stage by offering a take on how the emerging competition between the US and China is shaping the balance of power in the region. Next the middle part of the thesis will detail how India and Vietnam have been reacting to these shifts individually and bilaterally. And lastly, the direction of investigation will be reversed to consider how their cooperation is impacting the regional balance of power.

In applying structural realism and balance of power thinking to the case of India-Vietnam cooperation, the thesis is following the example of a number of international relations scholars who have already fruitfully investigated regional affairs involving smaller nations using such a framework. To name merely two such examples here, consider Renato Cruz de Castro's investigation on how the Philippines are navigating current shifts in the balance of power and Frederick Kliem's work on how the cooperation among Australia, India, the US and Japan within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is driven by realist considerations.<sup>16</sup> In both these scholars' papers, realism has proved useful in identifying the forces that smaller nations have to consider in their external policies.

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<sup>16</sup> See (De Castro, *The Strategic Balance in East Asia and the Small Powers: The Case of the Philippines in the Face of the South China Sea Dispute*, 2016) and (Kliem, 2020). While Kliem is explicitly following a neorealist framework that goes back to Waltz, he goes beyond a balance of power approach to apply the criterion of balance of threat. This is a modification of Waltz's work that was pioneered by (Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 1987) takes power potential as its starting point but figures in the circumstances of how this power is exercised in order to come to a more differentiated view of when one nation's power is perceived as a threat by others.

With the relevance of a balance of power approach thus vindicated, what are its general tenets on how the need for self-help and power balancing play out in the international arena? Or, put more succinctly, according to Waltz's balance of power theorizing, how is a balance of power achieved? As the term balancing already implies, the theory predicts that nations will position themselves to counter relatively bigger powers, thereby contributing to the establishment of an equilibrium that safeguards a nation's preeminent goal in the realist framework, namely its security. This often leads weaker states to associate with each other in an effort to be stronger together and thereby to balance against an overly powerful other:

“Because power is a means and not an end, states prefer to join the weaker of two coalitions. (...) Secondary states, if they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side; for it is the stronger side that threatens them. On the weaker side, they are both more appreciated and safer, provided, of course, that the coalition they join achieves enough defensive or deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking.”<sup>17</sup>

Balancing by coalition as it is referred to here is not the only option that states have to alter the balance of power in their favor. Waltz distinguishes between “internal” and “external” balancing, which refer to a strengthening of the states' own capabilities, for example in military terms, and its pursuit of security through partnerships, coalitions and alliances respectively.<sup>18</sup> While these two modes of balancing are in principle distinct, they are intertwined in practice, as the internal strengthening of a nation's

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<sup>17</sup> P. 126 f. (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> See p. 168 (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979).

military capabilities will also impact its attractiveness as a potential coalition partner for others.

As we will see further down, India and Vietnam are presently engaging in both external and internal balancing in reaction to the changing balance of power in their region. A closer look at the cohesion issues within ASEAN will also reveal that internal and external balancing are not the only possible strategy for nations facing a shifting balance of power. There also is bandwagoning, which refers to smaller powers aligning themselves with, instead of balancing against, a big power. While Waltz mentions bandwagoning as a potential strategic option, his theory has some difficulty explaining the logic behind it. Looking at bandwagoning behavior without theoretical preconceptions, the rationale for smaller nations to bandwagon is evident enough and it lies in hoping to achieve their national interests through submission and the avoidance of irritation in the relations to the big power. From the point of view of structural realism however, bandwagoning appears like a highly unattractive option, as it puts the smaller nation at the mercy of the bigger power without any leverage that would ensure that the bigger power will not abuse its advantage. Hence, for Waltz “balancing, not bandwagoning, is the behavior induced by the system”, making real-world instances of bandwagoning an oddity that the theory struggles to adequately capture.<sup>19</sup> Such a theoretical lacuna would be an obstacle for using the theory for the present purposes, particularly as regional states like Cambodia have been exhibiting clear signs of bandwagoning with China for some time.<sup>20</sup> The way to save Waltz’s theory from this challenge lies in pointing out that balancing behavior can only be expected if it is indeed a possibility for a state. One could argue, sticking with the case

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<sup>19</sup> P. 126 (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979).

<sup>20</sup> See p. 444 (Po & Primiano, 2020).

of Cambodia as an example, that the country's small size and economic potential make it impossible for it to balance China internally, while the absence of a regional coalition strong enough to mount a credible deterrence against China explains why external balancing also fails to be a good option for the government in Phnom Penh. The decision to bandwagon with Beijing is thus a forced choice for Cambodia and can as such be accommodated within the framework of structural realism.

With the choice of a realist framework, the thesis is consciously choosing a different point of view from the constructivist angle that the renowned international relations scholar Amitav Acharya has adopted in his important work on ASEAN. Acharya, who has written extensively on ASEAN and its regional affairs, has greatly contributed to the understanding of the normative and relational components within Southeast Asia's security arrangements. Hence, it is important to briefly clarify the motivation behind the choice of viewing the region from a different theoretical angle than Acharya.

Acharya's book *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* has gone through multiple editions, and he has recently followed it up with his *ASEAN and Regional Order: Revisiting Security Community in Southeast Asia*, where he contextualizes the reading of ASEAN as a Security Community with the recent regional developments, in particular the intensification of big power competition.<sup>21</sup> The appeal of the concept of a security community in describing the evolution of ASEAN cooperation becomes apparent when laying out its characteristics. Within such a community, the members establish positive relationships among each other through constructive dialogue, trust building measures and ultimately the establishment of common norms and a shared identity.

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<sup>21</sup> See (Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia*, 2009) and (Acharya, *ASEAN and Regional Order*, 2021).

The upshot is that over time the constituents of the ASEAN community have become so accustomed to peaceful means of resolving their conflicts that war amongst the member states has become less and less thinkable.<sup>22</sup>

While Acharya's constructivist reading of ASEAN's achievements in maintaining peace among each other is plausible, an adoption of his framework to the questions under consideration in this thesis promises little success. As will be argued further down, the main driver bringing India and Vietnam closer together are shared security concerns vis-à-vis an increasingly assertive China, not their membership in a common security community. And China's unilateral actions in pursuing its revisionist goals are clearly showing the limits of the type of normative socialization that Acharya's work identifies as one of ASEAN's main accomplishments. Putting it poignantly, if Acharya's research has shown how ASEAN has successfully mitigated the impact of anarchy among its members by building close ties of trust, then this beneficial state of affairs does not seem to extend to the broader Indo-Pacific Region. This is not to say that this undermines the value of his work but instead shows that theories in international relations should be approached eclectically, choosing the appropriate framework according to the questions under investigation.<sup>23</sup> The clarity of its focus as well as the resilience of its framework make structural realism an ideal framework to apply to the case of India-Vietnam relations in the Indo-Pacific region. This is true even more so, as the current investigation's focus on the security dimension of this bilateral cooperation squares well with the priority that structural realism accords to

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<sup>22</sup> See p. 8 f. (Acharya, ASEAN and Regional Order, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> See p. 46 (Reus-Smit, 2020).

material power and each nation's need to fend for its security in an essentially ungoverned environment.<sup>24</sup>

A consequence of the employment of the structural realist framework is that it does not by itself take into consideration the domestic drivers and pressures that exist within the concerned nations. As the fundamental assumption of anarchy holds between nations and not within them, the realist lens cannot be used to illuminate the internal drivers and how they interact with the external structural pressures that India and Vietnam are facing. Consequently, the thesis does not go into the complexities of how Indian politics shapes the country's relations towards Vietnam. For the Vietnamese case, the nation's one-party system makes a general analysis of the connection between internal legitimacy and the country's external politics more straightforward, so that this connection is touched upon further down in this thesis.

The choice of structural realism as a theoretical framework also entails that the role of economic and institutional interdependence in the Indo-Pacific and in ASEAN is left mostly unattended in the following investigation. Liberalist approaches – like the one put forth by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye – with their strong focus on the binding effect of interdependence and cooperation would be better suited here and definitely have their place in analyzing the international relations of a region as deeply intertwined as the Indo-Pacific.<sup>25</sup> Yet, as will be elaborated on more further down, as ASEAN as the region's central multilateral institution has been very slow in reacting

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<sup>24</sup> The preceding two sections serve to briefly contextualize the present enquiry and its methodological approach with Acharya's influential work. Written with this specific purpose in mind, they do not go into the general debate between realists and constructivists, which is another topic, both interesting and important in its own right. For a broader and more thorough discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the realist approach from the point of view of constructivism, p. 167 ff, (Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations*, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> See (Keohane & Nye, 2011) for a relatively recent and influential exposition of a liberalist take on international relations that focuses on the role of interdependence.

to the geopolitical shifts in the region it is deemed more fruitful here to employ a realist framework to bring out more clearly the power dynamics that nations are forced to negotiate outside of ASEAN mechanisms.

Put positively, what structural realism can do is show us how the national interests of India and Vietnam push them towards cooperation against their biggest shared security threat, namely China. This perspective will thus yield the drivers behind India-Vietnam security cooperation. But what such structural considerations of power and threats cannot provide is a detailed prediction on the form or even the success of such cooperation. In Waltz's words, "international political theory deals with the pressures of structure on states, and not with how states will react to these pressures".<sup>26</sup> Hence, the thesis will go beyond an analysis of the drivers of India-Vietnam cooperation to also offer a detailed investigation of the concrete efforts of cooperation as well as their future potential and obstacles in order to come to a conclusion on how the bilateral security efforts between these two countries will likely impact the regional balance of power and the future of the countries concerned.

Having laid out the theoretical framework for the ensuing investigation, it is in order that this chapter close with a brief elaboration on the choice of this specific pair of nations and their partnership as the focus of this study.

India is the natural choice for this investigation as its large population size and the growth potential of its economy give put it in the unique position as a nation that can play a balancing role vis-a-vis China in the Indo-Pacific. In terms of the divisive impact big-power competition is developing in regional affairs, India's role is

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<sup>26</sup> P. 27 (Waltz, *Structural Realism after the Cold War*, 2000).

interesting because unlike Japan, it has been hesitant to align too closely with the US, thereby putting New Delhi in a position to represent an alternative security partner amidst growing US-China tensions in the region. From a standpoint of strategic convergence with Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam, it is further relevant that India also shares a land border with China, compelling it to strike a more careful balance towards Beijing than extra-regional actors like the US.

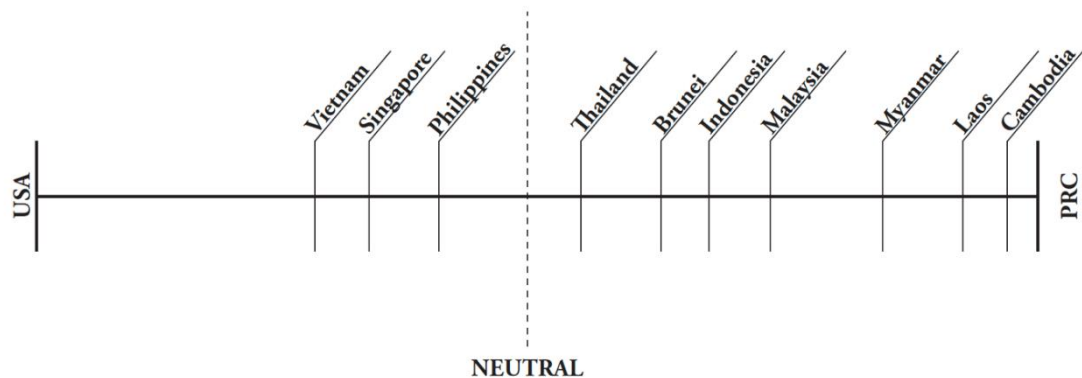
While India is thus clearly a unique regional actor, particularly when taking into account future potential, the choice of Vietnam from among the Southeast Asian nations might be more surprising. By right of size and leadership potential, Indonesia should be the natural choice as a subject for this study. However, the archipelagic nation has not lived up to this role within ASEAN as it has been preoccupied with internal issues and displaying an insular attitude in its approach to foreign policy.<sup>27</sup> Vietnam, while having a population that is less than half the size of Indonesia, has recently leveraged its strong economic growth rates and active external policies to make a major progress in terms of regional and global recognition.<sup>28</sup> It is also unique within ASEAN for being the country that is geographically the most dominated by China, and yet the most assertive politically in resisting Beijing's overreach, particularly in the South China Sea. International relations scholar David Shambaugh offers the following illustration in his book on Sino-American competition in Southeast Asia, which nicely shows Vietnam's position as an outlier in its stance against Beijing:

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<sup>27</sup> See p. 228 f. (Shambaugh, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> See p. 209 f. (Shambaugh, 2020).





### *1 ASEAN States' Relations with USA and PRC*<sup>29</sup>

While the graphic shows Vietnam leaning closer to the side of the US on the spectrum, the close investigation of its foreign policy position further down will show that it remains far from bandwagoning with the US. Instead, its increasing ties with Washington are best understood as a way to balance against Beijing, while its policy of multidirectional diplomatic outreach with deepening relations with a broad number of nations makes Vietnam the most interesting Southeast Asian country to study when it comes to avoiding instrumentalization by the big powers.

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In summary, India and Vietnam stand out for their unique potential in playing an important role in the Indo-Pacific's international politics that recommends them for deeper study. Their evolving security cooperation is interesting in its own right, while their reluctance to be subsumed in either of the poles of the China-US bipolarity makes them especially relevant in evaluating the region's potential to resist instrumentalization in this big power competition. In what follows, the thesis investigates these two Indo-Pacific nations, individually and then in their efforts at

<sup>29</sup> P. 243 (Shambaugh, 2020).

security cooperation. But first, the driving role of the US-China competition for regional dominance is sketched using the focal points of Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea and the US pushback incorporated in the so-called 'Free and Open Indo Pacific' as well as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS.

### **3. Big Power Competition as the Driver of Security Politics in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific**

It is a fact that historically big power politics has long had a strong impact on Southeast Asia, be it through colonialism or Cold War politics. This is also evident in the fact that in the very characterization of Southeast Asia as a distinct region, scholars have often made recourse to the big powers at the region's perimeter. Hence, geographical conceptualizations, such as "south of China, east of India" have often served as a first approximation in order to come to grips with delineating this miraculously diverse region.<sup>30</sup> And while scholars engaged in finding and constructing the unifying element in Southeast Asian regionalism have turned away from defining the region in terms of the big nations that surround it and have instead turned to an approach of seeing 'unity in diversity', India and China's role in shaping the region has always gone beyond merely bounding it.<sup>31</sup> Historically, this is clear from the cultural, economic and social impact the two civilizations have left in the forms of myths, trading routes and ancestry of many of its inhabitants.

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<sup>30</sup> P. 291 (Acharya, *The Making of Southeast Asia*, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> For further elaboration of the idea of unity in diversity and the development of an alternative suggestion for unifying Southeast Asia as a region, see p. 5 ff. (Acharya, *The Making of Southeast Asia*, 2012).

Discussions on the contemporary international relations of Southeast Asia can get around contentious definitions of regional identity as they focus their attention on concrete actors such as the nation states that exist in the territory or their regional organization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN, particularly since it grew to encompass ten members in 1999, has shown how the region can prosper under its own guidance when it is left to develop under conditions of self-determination and peace.<sup>32</sup> Yet, while ASEAN continues to claim for itself the role as the central forum to shape the politics of Southeast Asia, this ambition has come under increasing pressure through the shearing forces exerted by the intensifying US-China big power competition.

Following the structural realist approach, it is a given that smaller nations will always have to pay close attention to the dynamics that govern the positions and interactions of the big powers that view themselves as stakeholders in their regions. As China's rise and the pushback led by the US reshape the regional balance of power, it is crucial to appreciate the dynamics of this big power competition for understanding the drivers behind deepened India-Vietnam security cooperation.

On the global level the emerging multidimensional competition between the US and China, which is complicated by continuing deep economic interconnectedness, is the single most important geopolitical factor today.<sup>33</sup> Initially, China's rise had been founded on its rapid economic development, which Beijing is increasingly aiming to translate into a geopolitical position that fits its historically founded self-image as a

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<sup>32</sup> See (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017).

<sup>33</sup> The Russian invasion of Ukraine and Russia's apparent willingness to fight wars of aggression for the sake of territorial expansion makes clear that China is not the only actor undermining the US. However, factors such as economic capacity and recent military buildup leave little doubt that China, not Russia, remains the US's main geopolitical challenge. See (Dobbins, Shatz, & Wyne, 2018).

regional hegemon.<sup>34</sup> Closely related to China's emergence as an ambitious regional power are the efforts of the United States and its allies to prevent Beijing from assuming too dominant a role in the region. This in turn reflects the US's self-understanding as the most powerful of all nations, one that is working off the proposition that it either is or should be able to defend its interests anywhere around the world and live up to its "leadership charge on diplomacy, security, economics, climate, pandemic response, and technology".<sup>35</sup> Arguably, the exceptional role that the US sees itself in is founded on its continued leadership in the fields of economy, technology, diplomacy and defense. Historically, this is further substantiated by the relatively recent collective memory of the US's so-called "unipolar moment", a phase in which the US was unchallenged as the biggest global power and which began with the end of the cold war and the dissolution of its systemic competitor, the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> However, the fading of American unipolarity around the middle of the 2000s, which has become palpable in the world financial crisis in 2008, has put China and Russia into a position to again contend with US preeminence, at least in their respective neighborhoods. This shift in the balance of power has so far manifested most clearly in areas far away from the US mainland and hence in places where Washington's efforts must contend with the "tyranny of distance" strongly increasing the cost of Washington's sustained power projection.<sup>37</sup> In the case of Russia, this has been demonstrated in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine earlier this year. As for China, increasing assertiveness across an expanding set of so-called "core national interests" has signaled a more confrontational approach

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<sup>34</sup> See (Goldstein, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> P. 18 (The White House, 2022).

<sup>36</sup> P. 1 (O'Rourke, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> (Holmes, 2016).

to US interests, particularly in China's region of the world. This has also included the elevation of China's territorial claims in the South China Sea to the level of a core national interest.<sup>38</sup> Beijing's shift in posture is going hand in hand with the shrinking relative power difference in terms of the projection of military force between China and the US. Naturally, this shift is most clear in China's neighborhood, where American forces are operating at a long distance from their lines of support and where it is easier for China to establish the legitimacy of its assertive position. In terms of actions taken, this shift in the regional balance of power has been underpinned by Chinese military exercises close to contested island features in the East China Sea, frequent intrusion into Taiwanese airspace and assertive actions to bolster sweeping Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.<sup>39</sup>

Given the importance of the shifts in global power politics that are driven by the emerging big power competition, it is no wonder that there is an abundance of publications that focus on its state and implications. The awareness at the government level is reflected in comprehensive pieces written by US government agencies as well as think tank publications that aim to inform the policy debates.<sup>40</sup> By building a better understanding of returning big power competition the hope is evidently that the political response can be shaped in a beneficial way. However, in these publications the focus lies quite naturally on the implications for the behavior of the competing big powers themselves, particularly on the possible reactions by the US. Much less space

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<sup>38</sup> See p. 33 f. (Zhou, 2019) and (Rudd, *How Xi Jinping Views the World: The Core Interests that Shape China's Behavior*, 2018) for analysis of China's core national interests, including their relative importance.

<sup>39</sup> See (Wang, 2021) and (Grossman, *Taiwan Is Safe Until at Least 2027, but with One Big Caveat*, 2021) for coverage of some of China's recent assertive behavior.

<sup>40</sup> For examples, see (Department of Defense, 2020) and (Mazarr, Charap, Casey, & Chindea, 2021)

is given to the perspective of the smaller nations that find themselves caught in between the poles of big power competition, such as the nations of Southeast Asia.

### **3.1 China's Expansionism in the South China Sea from the Perspective of India and Vietnam**

Among the areas that most clearly show the emergence of China as an assertive regional actor is the South China Sea, where Beijing is pushing for very expansive territorial claims against a number of smaller Southeast Asian claimants. While many of the islands that are at the center of these conflicts are hardly more than sandbanks or rock formations, there are three factors that make them and the maritime areas around them valuable to the claimant countries as well as to other stakeholders around the globe, like India. Firstly, the South China Sea is home to some eminently important and busy trading routes. Its importance for global trade in goods and natural resources, like oil and gas, is outstanding and it has been estimated that 21% of world trade in 2016 flowed through the South China Sea with these numbers only increasing with Asia's growing role in the global economy.<sup>41</sup> For Vietnam, virtually all sea-bound trade has to traverse the South China Sea. This is particularly worrying as China has even challenged claims of Vietnam that fall into its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), thereby undermining sovereignty in even the waters closest to its coast.<sup>42</sup> As a quickly developing nation with a big stake in international trade, extensive claims over important trading routes are also of concern for India.<sup>43</sup>

Beyond the sea's role for trade, the South China Sea's richness in natural resources, particularly in fish and hydrocarbons, has given a further economic dimension to the

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<sup>41</sup> See (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2017).

<sup>42</sup> See (Le Thu, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> See p. 88 f. (Jawli, 2016).

dispute, one which has directly affected Vietnam and India. The two countries have been engaged in joint exploration projects for hydrocarbons in the South China Sea since the late 1980s. However, recently China's increasing assertiveness has led to tensions around these projects, even though they are carried out in Vietnam's EEZ. Even as the state-run Indian oil company OVL had to abandon some of the supposed drilling sites as they failed to discover oil or gas in the designated area, the Vietnamese government invited OVL to stay invested in further explorations in Vietnamese waters.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the cooperation has continued in spite of China's repeated warnings towards India against taking up such Vietnamese offers.<sup>45</sup> The resolve of India and Vietnam to continue their partnership in this field has been confirmed during a meeting of the countries' presidents in 2018, where they stated:

“The two Leaders agreed to continue promoting bilateral investment, including cooperation projects between PVN and ONGC in oil and gas exploration on land, continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Viet Nam, and encouraged the two sides to be more active in identifying models for cooperation, including those involving third country. The Vietnamese side welcomed and agreed to create facilitating conditions for Indian companies to invest into new thermal energy and renewable energy projects in Viet Nam.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See p. 82 (Jha & Vinh, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> See (Dasgupta, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> (Minsitry of External Affairs, 2018a)

As the statement also puts the option of including further partners in the exploration efforts on the table, China's intimidation method seems to be backfiring. Indeed, commentators have interpreted India's role as a partner in oil exploration in the South China Sea to go well beyond economic objectives, by signaling India's support for the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which protects Vietnam's sovereignty in its EEZ and disavows China's sweeping territorial claims.<sup>47</sup> Such an interpretation of the sustained India-Vietnam partnership in oil exploration suggests looking at it in a somewhat similar light to the US-led freedom of navigation exercises held in the SCS.<sup>48</sup> Just as there is little military value in sailing warships through the SCS, the role of economic motives might be small in the case of joint exploration projects between OVL and PVN. The real value of these efforts is politically and symbolic, making clear the refusal to be coerced by Beijing's bellicose rhetoric.

Beyond the dimension of trade and resources, there remains the great value of the South China Sea from a defense and security perspective. This last point is particularly salient for the ASEAN claimants, most crucially Vietnam, for its long coastline and relative proximity to many of the islands make China's claim over them a big security threat. Conversely, from the PRC's point of view, the importance of the islands and territorial waters lies in their potential role in expanding Chinese influence and control over these important sealines. The potential military value of the islands for China stems from the prospect to use them as forward military bases from which to project power in the region. As such, control over and fortification of island features in the South China Sea is an important step towards establishing control over maritime and air space within the so-called "First Island Chain" and thereby lessening

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<sup>47</sup> See p. 83 (Jha & Vinh, 2020).

<sup>48</sup> See (Smith, 2017).



the ability of the US to exercise control in this area.<sup>49</sup> Beyond such pragmatic considerations, there is also a big ideological component to the PRC's claim, that goes back to Beijing's narrative of the "century of humiliation" and the need to redress the national disgrace that China has suffered at the hands of foreign powers.<sup>50</sup>

The relevance of the security angle on developments in the SCS is underscored by the fact that the militarization of the conflict has progressed at a worrying pace. China, the Philippines and Vietnam have engaged in land reclamation projects in order to consolidate their claims and expand the land area of the island features to increase their ability to host infrastructure, often of a military nature. Of the claimants, China is by far the one with the most ambitious land reclamation efforts, with large-scale reclamations being conducted particularly after 2014. It is also the nation that has based the most capable military infrastructure on its islands.<sup>51</sup> The US and its allies are also contributing to the perception of military escalation by frequently sailing through the territory claimed by the SCS with large military vessels as part of their freedom of navigation exercises.<sup>52</sup> While the intended purpose of such action is to pushback against overreaching Chinese territorial claims, the practice has been criticized as bearing the risk of consequential accidents and instances of miscommunication.<sup>53</sup> As the following section will show, such freedom of navigations exercises constitute only one aspect of America's much more comprehensive reaction to China.

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<sup>49</sup> See (Vorndick, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> See (Hartnett & Reckard, 2017) and (Zhou, 2019).

<sup>51</sup> See p. 212 (Ha, 2018) and (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> See (Smith, 2017).

<sup>53</sup> (Panter, 2021)

### 3.2 The US-led Pushback against China: FOIP, Quad and AUKUS

While the emergence of China as an assertive force in the South China Sea has significantly challenged shared interests of India and Vietnam in a stable and rules-based maritime neighbourhood, other stakeholders have also been strongly affected, most importantly the United States. Commensurate to its status as the world's strongest military and economic power, the US has interests around the globe. In the SCS, these consist mainly in maintaining the status quo of a peaceful region that allows for freedom of navigation and the uninhibited transit for trade and American power projection.<sup>54</sup> The US is actively backing these interests militarily by the deployment of significant military assets in its bases in Guam and Japan. Equally important is the multilateralization of its efforts to balance China, which relies on joining together with US allies and other willing regional stakeholders in order to resist Chinese unilateral moves in the SCS. Broadly under the leadership of the US and Japan, those stakeholders viewing China's rise and revisionary stance in the region as contrary to their interests have responded with two closely related moves, one focussing on the conceptual side, the other on the building of coalitions of interest.

Conceptually, a growing number of nations has shifted away from the long-established Asia-Pacific framework and towards a coupled approach to the Indian and Pacific Oceans that is captured by the adoption of the term Indo-Pacific. Australia, India, Japan, the US and ASEAN have all published documents on their strategic outlook that feature the Indo-Pacific framework.<sup>55</sup> And while its geographical scope is

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<sup>54</sup> See (Smith, 2017)

<sup>55</sup> See for example (Department of State: United States of America, 2019), (Australian Government: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017).

not sharply delineated in a unified way, it consistently puts greater weight on the maritime interconnectedness between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, which are connected via the Strait of Malacca and other important trade routes.<sup>56</sup> It thereby brings India, formerly at the conceptual boundary of the Asia-Pacific, into the core of the new regional framework. Simultaneously, it draws attention to the strategic and military aspects of the ocean territories in the region.

In coming to an explanation of why this new framing with its shift in focus is attractive for many countries, there are at least two components. For one, it is a recognition of India's growing regional importance, which fits poorly with its position at the margins of the Asia-Pacific. Furthermore, it can be seen as part of a "China-balancing agenda", as it can be interpreted not just as an acknowledgement of India's current position, but as an invitation for India to play a bigger role in the future.<sup>57</sup> Viewed in this way, the Indo-Pacific framework redraws the conceptual boundaries of the Asia-Pacific at a time when China is emerging with ambitions to become the regional leader. This is done in a way that replaces a potentially "Sino-centric"<sup>58</sup> Asia-Pacific by a space that explicitly includes India and dilutes China's clout through region's sheer size.

As these considerations imply, the framing of the Indo-Pacific constitutes "a political term and (is) therefore neither purely descriptive nor value-neutral".<sup>59</sup> The political agenda is particularly visible in the way the Indo-Pacific framework is spelled out further in the concept of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP). Central to the FOIP

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<sup>56</sup> There are other routes connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, for example the Sunda Strait and the Lombok Strait. See (Storey, 2006) for elaboration on some of the strategic considerations prompted by the enormous importance of such chokepoints as the Malacca Strait. The article focuses on China, but similar considerations apply to other nations in the regions, like Japan and South Korea.

<sup>57</sup> (Adducul, 2018).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> P. 2 (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020).

are the ideas of freedom of navigation and a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>60</sup> This concept has been endorsed by Japan, the US, Australia and others and while there are slight differences in the exegesis of the term, it has a common core built around the promotion of a rules-based international order and the freedom of navigation and trade in the region.<sup>61</sup> It hence aligns closely with the US's interests. In an article published back in 2012, Shinzo Abe, the former prime minister of Japan, suggested a “Democratic Security Diamond”<sup>62</sup> as a containment strategy for China. While the term failed to gain broad currency, its core ideas are interestingly the same that motivate the FOIP framework.

“Peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean. Japan, as one of the oldest sea-faring democracies in Asia, should play a greater role – alongside Australia, India, and the US – in preserving the common good in both regions.”<sup>63</sup>

There is then a direct connection between the FOIP and a strategy that had been developed with the clearly stated goal of opposing China's emergence as a regional power. Of particular relevance for present purposes is the reference Abe makes to India as a designated partner in this effort. Compared to Abe's clearly confrontational rhetoric – in the article he goes on to warn of the South China Sea turning into “Lake Beijing” from where China's People Liberation Army will scare its neighbors with

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<sup>60</sup> See p. 7 f. (Department of State: United States of America, 2019).

<sup>61</sup> See p. 11 ff. (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020).

<sup>62</sup> (Abe, 2012). The article published under the title “Asia's Democratic Security Diamond” suggested a containment strategy against China.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

nuclear threats<sup>64</sup> – India has been keen to avoid appearing openly aversive towards China, showing thereby a diplomatic sensibility that is very much in line with ASEAN’s practice of soft-spoken diplomacy.

Consequently, the Indian government under Prime Minister Modi has initially been rather careful in aligning itself with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific terminology as spelled out by the US and Japan. At the same time, Modi still signaled general agreement with its declared goals. As can be seen from Modi’s speech given at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, India gives big weight to ASEAN Centrality in order to tactfully express support for maintaining a regional order that China seems bent on changing:

“The ten countries of South East Asia connect the two great oceans in both the geographical and civilizational sense. Inclusiveness, openness and ASEAN centrality and unity, therefore, lie at the heart of the new Indo-Pacific. India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country. (...) It stands for a free, open, inclusive region, which embraces us all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity. It includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it.”<sup>65</sup>

Modi here embraces the ideas of freedom and openness, but supplements them with the further principle of inclusiveness, which underlines his core message of forming a community that works towards common goals. He is very clear in his aim to avoid

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<sup>64</sup> See Ibid.; the term ‘Lake Beijing’ is set in quotation marks in the original article.

<sup>65</sup> (Modi, 2018).

open confrontation with China by stating that India's outlook on the Indo-Pacific is not "directed against any country"<sup>66</sup>. Yet, in spite of this inclusive rhetoric, it is obvious that the invitation for China to cooperate in the Indo-Pacific is opposed to strong tensions in Sino-Indian relationships. This has become most evident in the border clashes in Galwan Valley, where on June 15<sup>th</sup> 2020 skirmishes led to the death of 20 Indian Soldiers as well as an unknown number of Chinese casualties.<sup>67</sup> Yet more important than that, the whole orientation of the FOIP goes against China's policies in the SCS: Whereas China is bent on pushing through its territorial assertions against the resistance of other claimants, the FOIP is designed to strengthen the status quo and invalidate any unilateral actions by its reference to international law.

Going beyond merely redrawing the conceptual boundaries of the region, the US and its allies engage in more direct balancing behavior by coming together in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). The Quad has been established 2017 by the US, Japan, India and Australia as a forum for the coordination of security measures in the Indo-Pacific region. In terms of its function, the Quad has been a venue for meetings of government officials at increasingly high levels, with a ministerial meeting held in 2019 and the first Quad summit in 2021 with US president Biden affirming his administration's engagement in the region.<sup>68</sup> Due to the strong endorsement of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific by its members, the Quad has been

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> See (Panda A. , 2020).

<sup>68</sup> See p. 28 (Jaishankar 2019) and (The White House 2021).

described as the forum that “embodies the geostrategic and geo-economic framework of the FOIP”.<sup>69</sup>

In some publications, the Quad is also referred sometimes referred to as “Quad 2.0”, which stems from the fact that it follows in the footsteps of a previous iteration of security dialogues, “Quad 1.0”, initiated in 2007 by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan.<sup>70</sup> As the first iteration of the Quad disintegrated very quickly and proved to be of little relevance, while the second iteration is posed to stay, the present thesis will simply refer to the present format as the Quad, omitting any numerals. More interesting than the terminological distinction between the two iterations of the Quad is the question of why the second iteration has been able to gain so much more traction and commitment from its member countries than the first. Scholar Frederick Kliem has argued convincingly that the new staying power of the Quad is due to the shifts in the regional balance of power, in particular in the heightened threat perception among Quad members regarding the PRC.<sup>71</sup> It is therefore very plausible to interpret the Quad as an attempt by its members to counter China’s disruption of the status quo by engaging in external balancing through association with like-minded partners. Such an interpretation is further supported by Beijing’s strongly negative reaction to the Quad. China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi still played down the relatively new Quad as a passing phenomenon by likening it to sea foam forming on the Indian and Pacific oceans in 2018. But he displayed more serious concern in 2020, when he referred to it as a “so called Indo-Pacific NATO”.<sup>72</sup> As factually speaking, the Quad in its present form remains far away from turning into a fully formalized

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<sup>69</sup> P. 10 (European Foundation for South Asian Studies 2020).

<sup>70</sup> P. 272 (Kliem, 2020).

<sup>71</sup> See p. 276 ff. (Kliem, 2020).

<sup>72</sup> (Rej, 2020).

alliance like NATO, the attitude implicit in these remarks is more interesting than their content, as it reveals that China is wary of partnerships forming in response to its actions in the Indo-Pacific. Such worries have been aggravated by the recent emergence of the so-called Quad-Plus dialogue, a format where the four original Quad members informally come together with a growing number of other nations that include South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand in order to exchange views on strategic matters ranging from the Covid-19 pandemic to security.<sup>73</sup> On the one hand, the Quad Plus constitutes a valuable extension that shows the attractiveness of the FOIP for a broad range of nations. On the other hand, its broad and loose membership make it even less suitable to take coordinated action on sensitive issues pertaining to security, making its future development and relevance a matter of speculation. This is true even more so as even the comparatively compact original four-member Quad has been criticized for its relative inactivity and for falling behind the effectiveness of the long-established Trilateral-Defense-Ministers' Meeting between the US, Japan and Australia.<sup>74</sup> The critique sees India as less committed to the homogenous strategic outlook of the three other Quad members on core issues like Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and the Pacific Region. Furthermore, in terms of its global strategic orientation, India has also played its role as the odd one out among the Quad quartet by failing to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>75</sup> What this hints at is that India, in spite of its identification with the goals of the FOIP, has somewhat diverging interests as compared to the other three Quad members.

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<sup>73</sup> See p. 3 f. (Panda J. , Quad Plus: Form versus Substance, 2020).

<sup>74</sup> See (Channer, 2022).

<sup>75</sup> See *ibid.*



A further pointer that there remains some distance between the India and its Quad partners can be seen in the constitution of yet another, even newer security-focused minilateral that has been established under US leadership in the IPR, namely AUKUS. Founded on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2021, AUKUS is a security partnership between the Australia, the UK and the US focused on strengthening defense and diplomatic cooperation in the IPR.<sup>76</sup> Announced together with the establishment of the partnership was AUKUS's first common project, namely the provision of a new fleet of nuclear powered submarines to Australia.<sup>77</sup> Beyond this, the leaders' vision statement leads back the groupings rationale to the partners' long history in cooperation and their commonly held values, which are in line with the FOIP.<sup>78</sup> Compared to the Quad, the trilateral AUKUS is can build on much tighter preexisting bonds, as expressed in the massive financial commitment that goes along with the nuclear submarine project. With Australia as its regional spearhead, the grouping is prizing homogeneity over broad regional representation. While on the face of it, the lack of more of any other regional members, such as an ASEAN state, might be taken with some irritation, India and Vietnam should welcome AUKUS and its strong commitment from a realist perspective. Being a very tight-knit grouping determined to take action on a scale intended to have a perceptible impact on the regional balance of power, AUKUS is poised to be a substantial boost for the FOIP. While India's (or Vietnam's) hesitant role in the Quad (or the Quad Plus respectively), signals that neither of them would fit into AUKUS, they are likely to welcome this partnership as a balance to Beijing.

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<sup>76</sup> See (Allison, 2021).

<sup>77</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

In an environment shaped by China's emergence as an assertive regional power and the reaction against that, which is broadly led by the US and other closely aligned stakeholders like Japan and Australia, India and Vietnam find each other gravitating towards the ideas embodied in the FOIP. With the two nations aiming to protect their interest in maintaining their strategic independence and space for economic development, they are natural partners. The paper will now turn to detailing the development of their security cooperation based on their common interests.

This chapter has outlined China's assertive actions in the SCS as the most visible impetus to the changing regional balance of power in the IPR. It has contrasted this with the efforts led by the US and its allies to counter these developments through the reconceptualization of the region as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and the concomitant establishment of security-oriented minilaterals, namely the Quad and AUKUS. While Vietnam has only been touched upon very briefly through its membership in the Quad Plus arrangement, India's membership in the Quad has given a two-fold insight into New Delhi's position towards the current big power dynamic in the IPR. On the one hand, India is supportive of the FOIP and willing to translate this support into action within the framework of the Quad. On the other hand, it remains less aligned with the US position than Japan, Australia or the UK. India's affinity for the US-led position therefore appears to have its limits.

The next chapter with its focus on India will provide a better understanding of the constitution of Indian interests in the Indo-Pacific, yielding important insights into where the foundation for India-Vietnam cooperation lies. In combination with the following chapter and its respective focus on Vietnam, the overarching aim of the

next two chapters is to provide a deepened understanding of what it is in the national outlooks of both these nations that brings them into a close defense partnership today.

#### **4. India as an Emerging Actor in Southeast Asia**

Looking at the fundamental facts, India is destined to be one of the main drivers of Asia's balance of power. Its places second only to China in terms of population size, with this order destined to reverse soon as a consequence of India's higher population growth.<sup>79</sup> Economically, it is currently ranked third in Asia, behind China and Japan, putting South Korea in a distant fourth place.<sup>80</sup> As a measure of how well it is leveraging its strong fundamentals to project power in the region, the Asia Power Index compiled by the Australian Lowy Institute indicates that it currently ranks fourth according to the institute's 'Comprehensive Power' indicator, putting it behind only the US, China and Japan.<sup>81</sup> India has therefore emerged as one of the strongest middle powers in Asia, one that maintains serious potential for further growth in the coming decades.

In order to understand India's current stance on external affairs, one needs to take into consideration how India's outward posture has evolved throughout its rise to its current status as a strong middle power from the time of its independence from the British Empire. Given the thesis's realist framework and its interest in the present state and relevance of India-Vietnam relations, taking such a historical approach to

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<sup>79</sup> See (Ritchie, 2019).

<sup>80</sup> See (World Bank, 2021).

<sup>81</sup> See (Lowy Institute, 2021 a). This composite indicator aims to capture nations' across-the-board power in Asia by factoring in eight dimensions of power, such as economic and military capabilities and also diplomatic influence and defense networks.

the Indian position might appear needlessly complicated. However, it is a fact often referenced in relation to India's international posture, that the country's history is having a strong lingering effect.<sup>82</sup> Hence, integrating a look at the roots of its foreign policy will be important in gaining a fuller picture of its India's present conduct.

Of particular interest in this respect is India's role as a leading actor in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Even as the NAM has recently lost some of its relevance in international affairs, India's important role in the movement remains significant in comprehending how New Delhi has evolved from following a highly idealistic foreign policy to adopting an outlook more directly informed by realism, all the while holding on to the rhetoric of non-alignment. To capture the full arch of this development, the chapter's further sections go into India's growing engagement with Southeast Asia under the Look and Act East policies, before arriving at an analysis of India's present interests from a balance of power perspective. With these findings in hand, the last section of the chapter then goes into how India has engaged with ASEAN in pursuit of these interests, thereby showing the limits of ASEAN as a venue for India's external balancing efforts.

#### **4.1 India and the Non-Aligned Movement**

India's choice of following a path of non-alignment after its independence from the British Empire finds its root cause in the country's experience of 200 years of colonialism, which left the young nation with a strong aversion to any external interference in its politics and predisposed it against joining in the Cold War on either

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<sup>82</sup> See, among others, (Khilani, et al., 2012), (Pant & Super, India's 'non-alignment' conundrum: a twentieth-century policy in a changing world, 2015) and (Tripathi, 2019).

side.<sup>83</sup> What further contributed to its detachment from much of international power politics was the fact that neither of the two emerging Cold War blocks viewed India as strategically central, giving the Indian leadership the welcome chance to prioritize domestic issues around much needed development over defense expenditures. Also on the ideological level, non-alignment made sense for India, as its democratic structure and remaining connections to the UK, which would have suggested affiliation with the Western Block, were offset by respect for the Soviet Union's success in quickly industrializing a large country using a planned communist economy.<sup>84</sup>

India's geographical position on the subcontinent further contributed to making non-alignment an attractive policy choice as it left only limited exposure to potential threats, with Pakistan being at the time the only perceived direct security risk.<sup>85</sup> Conversely, the Northeastern border with the PRC was not considered a serious peril and hence addressed only by the adoption of an idealist approach that aimed to establish good relations under shared norms with the PRC. The related policy, called Panchsheel, which translates to the "Five Principles of Peaceful Existence", went back to a shared initiative under the PRC's Zhou Enlai and India's Jawaharal Nehru to regulate Sino-Indian relations in 1954.<sup>86</sup> The five principles were "mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; non-aggression; non-interference in one another's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence".<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> See p. 5 (Ganguly & Paradesi, 2009).

<sup>84</sup> See p. 748 f. (Pant & Super, India's 'non-alignment' conundrum: a twentieth-century policy in a changing world, 2015).

<sup>85</sup> See p. 749 (Pant & Super, India's 'non-alignment' conundrum: a twentieth-century policy in a changing world, 2015).

<sup>86</sup> See p. 369 (Narayanan, 2004) and (Republic of India; People's Republic of China, 1954).

<sup>87</sup> P. 7 (Ganguly & Paradesi, 2009); see also p. 751 (Pant & Super, India's 'non-alignment' conundrum: a twentieth-century policy in a changing world, 2015)

In the same year that the Panchsheel were introduced as guiding principles for Sino-Indian relations, Prime Minister Nehru coined the term 'non-alignment' in a speech given in Sri Lanka.<sup>88</sup> Beyond merely proposing non-alignment as a strategy for India, he found allies in a number of fellow leaders, namely Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, U Nu of Burma, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sukarno of Indonesia, who joined together in turning non-alignment into a big movement which persists to the present day.<sup>89</sup> Together, these heads of state served as the first group of charismatic leaders of the NAM, setting out to give the marginalized nations of the Global South a venue to voice their concerns and lend weight to their interests in multilateral arenas, most importantly at the UN. It is important to note that the NAM, while naturally very diverse in its membership, went beyond a mere commitment to neutrality, which could be misread as nonparticipation in world affairs. Instead, they pursued the positive goals of successively ridding the world of colonialization, gaining international recognition for the newly established sovereign states and limiting the impact of the Cold War rivalry between the Soviet and the Western Block.<sup>90</sup>

In the process of formalizing the NAM from a loose forum into an organized movement, the attractiveness of the Panchsheel Principles supported by Nehru in ameliorating Sino-Indian relations, was borne out by their becoming the starting point for the extended Ten Principles of Bandung. These principles stood as one of the outcomes of the important Asian-African Bandung Conference in 1955 and were

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<sup>88</sup> See p. 13 (Mathur, 2016)

<sup>89</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> See p. 81 and p. 83 (Dinkel, 2019).

subsequently accepted in the 1961 Conference of Non-aligned Nations in Belgrade as “the core principles behind the non-aligned Movement”.<sup>91</sup>

Beyond thus contributing to the ideational foundations of the non-aligned movement, India’s leading role in the NAM was demonstrated by Nehru successfully proposing the Resolution of Peaceful Coexistence at the UN in 1957 together with Sweden and Yugoslavia.<sup>92</sup> The resolution was again derived from the Panchsheel, thereby committing the UN to principles of international relations that are in line with the basic tenets of the NAM.

More recently, India has continued to show its leadership role in the NAM in its push for a reform of the functioning of the UN Security Council. While this institution is of central importance for the functioning of the UN, it remains heavily biased towards the interests of its permanent members, the so-called “Big five”, which are China, France, Russia, the UK and the US.<sup>93</sup> This arrangement, which goes back to these nations’ role as the victors of the Second World War and which grants them a special veto right in the UNSC, perpetuates the power distribution as it stood in the middle of the last century and is thus heavily biased against giving equal weight to the interests of the many nations in the Global South.<sup>94</sup> India, together with many of its fellow NAM members, has pushed for reform of the UNSC in 1979, when it proposed a resolution to increase the number of UNSC members to 19 by adding four additional non-permanent members. Such an increase could yield a broader regional representation in the council and would bolster the weight of the numerically large group of developing nations; however the proposal was not taken up as the Big Five

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<sup>91</sup> P. 370 (Narayanan, 2004).

<sup>92</sup> See p. 370 (Narayanan, 2004).

<sup>93</sup> See p. 11 (Mathur, 2016).

<sup>94</sup> See p. 292 (Sreenivasan, 2011)

did not approve of it.<sup>95</sup> A similar initiative by India and other partners in 1992 again failed to lead to the desired reforms.<sup>96</sup> In spite of the repeated failings of such initiatives, India keeps leading the push for changing the UNSC in favor of the interests of the NAM countries. This can be seen for example in Modi making UNSC reform a major talking point during the India-Africa Summit in 2015 or from the coordinated efforts of India's leadership to leverage its non-permanent seat on the UNSC in 2021 and 2022 in order to affect change.<sup>97</sup>

While the NAM is arguably less relevant today than it used to be, India's deep engagement in the NAM in previous decades greatly contributed to the respect it commanded internationally. Even though it was still a young and developing nation at the time, its special path of idealistic foreign policy set it apart from more established powers and appealed to many countries which found themselves marginalized in international politics. As scholar Somnath Ghosh remarks on India's place in the world, "It was this alignment of India's cultural and political identity with other nations that pivoted India in leadership space in international relations".<sup>98</sup> However, for India itself, the reliance on the power of idealism led into a deep crisis in 1962, when its approach to its relations with the PRC proved ill-advised as Chinese troops assaulted Indian territory in the Northeast.<sup>99</sup> The bitter defeat that India suffered in the mountainous border region between the two countries was a "watershed moment" in

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<sup>95</sup> See p. 16 (Mathur, 2016).

<sup>96</sup> See p. 17 (Mathur, 2016).

<sup>97</sup> See (Times of India, 2015) and (Zeeshan, 2021).

<sup>98</sup> P. 35 (Ghosh S. , 2019).

<sup>99</sup> See p. 751 (Pant & Super, India's 'non-alignment' conundrum: a twentieth-century policy in a changing world, 2015).



the way it conducted its foreign policy and led to a sharp increase in Indian military expenditure.<sup>100</sup>

While the experience of Chinese aggression also led India to transition to a more realist outlook regarding its national security, it continued to pursue an idealistic line on many issues of international politics, including its sustained leadership role in the NAM. Of particular relevance to the present thesis is the strong stance India took against US involvement in the Vietnam War, even at the cost of harsh American sanctions on India in 1966.<sup>101</sup> This not only demonstrated India's commitment to the Panchsheel Principles, but given that the US ultimately had to accept defeat in Vietnam, India's support for what was previously North Vietnam put New Delhi on the right side of history and laid the foundation of positive bilateral relations between the two countries. India again found itself taking Vietnam's side when it decided to recognize the People's Republic of Kampuchea as the legitimate government of Cambodia in 1980, after Vietnamese military intervention had contributed to ousting the Khmer Rouge the previous year.<sup>102</sup> Strengthening bilateral ties in yet another dimension, India provided developmental and economic assistance to Vietnam after its many wars had weakened its economy. This willingness to assist Hanoi also extended to Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai expressing India's readiness to aid Vietnam in the establishment of nuclear power plants during a visit to Vietnam in 1978.<sup>103</sup> While ultimately nothing came of this offer, it further exemplifies the Indian stance of solidarity towards Vietnam that was in line with the principles of the NAM and driven by the strategic convergence between India and Vietnam. After recent

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<sup>100</sup> P. 8 (Ganguly & Paradesi, 2009).

<sup>101</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> See p. 3 (Chakraborti, 2018 a).

<sup>103</sup> See p. 4 (Chakraborti, 2018 a)

history had given both nations reasons for extreme caution vis-à-vis China and while each of them was seeking favorable relations to the Soviet Union, their bilateral ties clearly developed along a positive trajectory during the Cold War.

#### **4.2 Growing from Look East to Act East**

As regional affairs continued to develop, the end of the Cold War and the increasing integration of Southeast Asia under the leadership of ASEAN prompted India to adopt a broader approach to its Southeastern neighborhood. ASEAN provided an progressively strengthened multilateral forum for deepening its engagement with the region and functioned as a gateway for India's regional outreach. While the cordial relations to Vietnam during the Cold War had been a big exception compared to relatively cool relations with other Southeast Asian states, particularly with the founding members of ASEAN, which India viewed as too closely aligned to the US, this new period saw a much broader effort by India to deepen relations with Southeast Asia.<sup>104</sup> When India first started to engage more deeply with Southeast Asia in 1991, it consolidated its efforts under its 'Look East Policy' (LEP).<sup>105</sup> Southeast Asia had many factors that made it attractive as a focus point of India's economic integration efforts. It was emerging as a fast-growing region that for the most part was at a somewhat comparable level of development as India. As an additional soft factor, there are also pervasive cultural and historical links between India and much of the region. Lastly, the region had begun to come together through ASEAN, which provided a useful venue for deepening relations as can be seen from India officially becoming a dialogue partner to ASEAN in 1996, one year after Vietnam became a

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<sup>104</sup> See p. 13 (Ganguly & Paradesi, 2009).

<sup>105</sup> See p. 1 (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2020).

member of ASEAN. Further deepening over time, India-ASEAN relations reached the level of strategic partnership in 2012.<sup>106</sup>

In retrospect, the LEP achieved many tangible outcomes, yet it also proved to have significant shortcomings.<sup>107</sup> The most concerning of these in terms of India's emerging ambitions as a regional power was the restricted scope of the LEP, as it was mostly designed as an economic policy and left little space for cooperation in the important field of security.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, the LEP did little to close India's development gap vis-à-vis China, which continued to outperform India significantly.<sup>109</sup>

Facing these shortcomings and the shifting of the regional balance due to China's ascent, Narendra Modi announced the evolution of the 'Look East Policy' into the 'Act East Policy' (AEP) in the context of the ASEAN-India Summit held in Myanmar in 2014.<sup>110</sup> As an overarching strategy for India's eastward policies, the AEP includes economic elements as well as security initiatives. Importantly, the AEP extends the LEP's geographical scope, going beyond Southeast Asia and putting additional weight on East Asian countries, particularly on South Korea and Japan.<sup>111</sup> In addition, Australia has emerged as an important partner. Thus, the AEP represents "the securitization, increased scope and greater urgency of India's prior Look East Policy".<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> See p. 2 (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2020).

<sup>107</sup> See p. 115 f. (Jha P. K., 2017).

<sup>108</sup> On p. 13 f. in (Ganguly & Paradesi, 2009) the authors disagree with the idea that the LEP was restricted to economic matters. In this, they seem to go against the consensus of other authors who conceptualize it as a policy aimed at economic development. See for example p. 4 (Jaishankar, 2019) and p. 6 (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2020).

<sup>109</sup> See p. 5 f. (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2020)

<sup>110</sup> See (Parameswaran, 2017).

<sup>111</sup> See p. 5 (Jaishankar, 2019).

<sup>112</sup> P. 15 (Jaishankar, 2019).

Beyond deepening efforts at economic integration, the AEP marks a “Change in Posture”<sup>113</sup> for India, a move towards a more active security policy. Fundamentally, such a shift has to include both, a strengthening of India’s own military capabilities and a more active role in the politics of the region, or to put it in the terms of realism, it needs to consist of internal and external balancing against China’s growing superiority. Efforts in terms of internal balancing are exemplified by India’s procurement contract for 36 French Rafale fighter aircraft, delivery of which has started in 2020 and its continued development of ballistic missiles, which form a crucial part of its nuclear deterrence strategy against foreign aggression.<sup>114</sup> The second element of a more involved regional security policy lies in actively engaging and coordinating with other regional stakeholders, which includes ASEAN and the Quad in terms of multilateral efforts, and strengthened bilateral relations with Vietnam, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and others.<sup>115</sup>

### 4.3 India’s Regional Interests

To develop a clearer understanding on what is mere rhetoric and what are core elements of India’s Indo-Pacific outlook, the most fruitful route will be to consider what are India’s national interests in this region. India’s disadvantages in terms of economic and military strength relative to China suggests that it should work towards the promotion of a rules-based order that broadly upholds the regional status-quo while allowing India to deepen its regional integration and the promotion of conditions favorable to economic development, with the hope of closing the gap with

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<sup>113</sup> P. 8 (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2020).

<sup>114</sup> See (Pant H. V., Rafale Jets Won't Save India's Air Force, 2020) for commentary on how the Rafales will or will not significantly improve the capabilities of the Indian Air Force. See (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020) for a brief overview of India’s arsenal of ballistic missiles.

<sup>115</sup> See p. 21 (Jaishankar, 2019).

China. Yet, as China's emergence as an assertive regional power is already the commanding feature in the regional balance of power, Delhi's goal of catching up with Beijing needs to be backed by smaller realist aims that support this broad goal of Indian policy.

In a report written for Brookings India, Dhruva Jaishankar identifies four such aims that he takes to be central to India's success in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>116</sup> Firstly, there is the need to secure the Indian Ocean through a strengthening of India's naval capabilities as well as intensifying the governance of this maritime area in response to Chinese military activity and investment, particularly in port infrastructure in many littoral states.<sup>117</sup> Secondly, India will need to seek better integration with Southeast Asia, as this promises economic growth and strength through shared defense interests. Jaishankar sketches the way forward to consist of a combination between further stressing institutional integration, particularly with ASEAN and its diverse venues for cooperation, intensified security cooperation that he sees mainly developing on a bilateral level and strengthened connectivity in terms of transport routes, trade and the flow of information and people.<sup>118</sup>

Thirdly, the report points out the importance of establishing partnerships with "balancing powers"<sup>119</sup>. These are nations that combine the features of having a stake in the region, broadly sharing India's strategic goals and commanding sufficient military weight to be a factor in the regional balance of power. As security cooperation with Southeast Asian nations has already been covered in his second point, this refers to other players, most importantly the US, Japan, Australia, South

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<sup>116</sup> See p. 6 (Jaishankar, 2019).

<sup>117</sup> 16 ff. (Jaishankar, 2019).

<sup>118</sup> See p. 20 ff. (Jaishankar, 2019).

<sup>119</sup> P. 24 (Jaishankar, 2019).

Korea, the biggest European nations, as well as Russia. Of these, Jaishankar takes Russia's potential role to be complicated by its increasing friendliness towards Beijing. The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine further reduces Moscow's potential role as an Indian balancing partner in the Indo-Pacific. Of the nations suitable for playing a balancing role, Jaishankar identifies the US, Japan and Australia to be India's most important partners. This is in part because of the deep roots of these nations' interests in the region and because India has already come together with these three in the Quad.

Lastly, Jaishankar sees a careful management of India's relationship with China as a goal that has to be integrated with the three other objectives mentioned so far.<sup>120</sup> India's goal should be to "manage China's rise"<sup>121</sup> not by trying to contain it, but by trying to interact with the reality of the PRC's growing power in a way that makes it compatible with India's interests. A factor to preclude security issues from escalating, like the territorial issues in the border region, could lie in building up a credible military deterrence.<sup>122</sup> In a somewhat similar vein, but thinking about the relationship more broadly, Jaishankar agrees that India's long-term hope for a healthy relationship with Beijing lies in India's own continued development, most importantly in economic terms.<sup>123</sup>

Looking at these four goals of Indian policy in the Indo-Pacific through the lens of balance of power, the first three clearly fulfill functions of internal and external balancing, while the fourth functions as a kind of second-order condition on India's balancing efforts: The upgrading of Indian naval capabilities is evidently a form of

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<sup>120</sup> See p. 30 (Jaishankar, 2019).

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> See p. 30 (Jaishankar, 2019).

<sup>123</sup> See p. 31 (Jaishankar, 2019).

internally balancing against China's naval expansion. The urgency of this becomes clear when considering that the country is in growing danger of facing a form of geopolitical encirclement under Chinese leadership, both on land and in the sea. On land, this includes having China as its neighbor to the North and Northeast and is aggravated by ever-growing Chinese economic and political influence in Nepal to the North and Pakistan to the West.<sup>124</sup> On the seas, China has grown its influence on the Maldives and in Sri Lanka, where it now controls the Hambantota Port due to Sri Lankan difficulties in servicing outstanding loan payments to China.<sup>125</sup> China's close relations to Pakistan are also playing into its growing role in the Indian Ocean through the Gwadar Port that was constructed as part of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor.<sup>126</sup> These developments suggest that India needs to significantly increase its power projection capabilities in the seas if it wants to keep China in check in this crucial maritime sphere.

This also directly connects with the second and third interests that Jaishankar identifies, which is to find partners to balance the PRC externally, for New Delhi's subscription to the FOIP and its membership in the Quad are the best example. Yet, if one leaves aside these developments in the maritime sphere, one might wonder why India would have opted to be a Quad member in the first place. If one only thinks of India as a land-based power, one could ask if India would not be better off by standing on the sidelines of the Quad, reaping the benefits of a US-led pushback in the Indo-Pacific and avoiding further weighing down relations with Beijing. By engaging in the maritime-centered FOIP framework and the Quad, India seems only to add

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<sup>124</sup> See (Battarai, 2020)

<sup>125</sup> See (Moramudali, 2020).

<sup>126</sup> See (Iwanek, 2019)

another area of competition beyond its disputed Northern and Northeastern land border with China and its Western border, where it is in disagreement with Pakistan. However, considering India's broader national interest in economic development, in a stable neighborhood and in maintaining Indian primacy in the Indian Ocean it becomes clear that India needs to actively engage in regional affairs if it wants to push back against Chinese encroachment and this centrally includes engaging in external balancing with suitable partners.

The fourth factor that Jaishankar pinpoints, the need to “manage China's rise”<sup>127</sup> stands out from the rest of the interest described. Given that the three previously described interest actually are India's best bet in responding to China's rise, thereby ‘managing’ it through balancing it, this aspect should not be taken as a separate interest, but better be read as a constraint for how India can pursue its balancing strategy, both internally and externally, as inscribed in the previous three points. What Jaishankar's fourth point amounts to is that India's balancing of China will have to be done in a measured way, that allows India to “dampen security competition” with the PRC and “get its bilateral relations with China right”.<sup>128</sup> This entails that India needs to find the middle ground between submitting to Chinese domination, while simultaneously avoiding any excess in its response that could contribute to further escalation of the relationship. This point is thus an admonishment that India's balancing against China needs to operate under constraints, that it is a true “balancing act”.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> P. 30 (Jaishankar, 2019)

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.



Thinking back to India's role as the 'odd one out' in the Quad, where it is lagging behind the other three members in its willingness to commit to strong measures, Jaishankar's fourth point now gives a probable explanation: India differs from its fellow Quad members in the degree that it needs to factor in the Chinese reaction to any measure that Beijing perceives as aggression. Due to its more direct regional exposure, India is thus more hesitant than either the US, Japan or Australia need to be. Jaishankar is not alone in pointing out the delicate nature of India's position and the equilibrium that New Delhi has been trying to strike has been described elsewhere as "evasive balancing".<sup>130</sup>

Contextualizing this historically, the "Change in Posture" that Modi's introduction of the Act East policy constituted a partial reassessment of the nation's past commitment to non-alignment.<sup>131</sup> It is a considered move to react to increasing Chinese assertiveness by seeking deeper regional involvement that extends beyond mere economic cooperation by including more sensitive issues, such as security. This move speaks of a rising awareness in New Delhi, that the assertive terms of Chinese expansion require more robust forms of balancing, both internally and externally. In the words of two observers, the AEP is founded on the realization that pursuit of "strategic autonomy separately from non-alignment" is possible and indeed necessary in India's new geopolitical environment.<sup>132</sup> And indeed, India's membership in the Quad has signaled its readiness to come much closer to the US-led position than its historical interpretation of non-alignment would have allowed. Yet, as the differential between the US-Japan-Australia trilateral and the Quad signals, India is still stopping

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<sup>130</sup> P. 79 (Rajagopalan, 2020)

<sup>131</sup> P. 8 (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2020).

<sup>132</sup> P. 764 (Pant & Super, India's 'non-alignment' conundrum: a twentieth-century policy in a changing world, 2015).

short of fully getting in line behind the US and its allies. And the reason for this is clear and lies in the fact that it is forced by its geopolitical circumstances to weigh more carefully than its three partners the cost of Chinese punitive reactions. What this shows is that for India, strategic autonomy, in this instance read as its ability to find ways to peacefully follow its goals of socio-economic development, continues to be intertwined with the need to keep some distance from the big power rivalry between the US and China. While India's role of staying something of an outlier among the Quad partners has little in common with the idealism that charged Indian non-alignment after its independence, the basic motivation for carving out its own space in international relations remains the same and lies in avoiding the cost of involvement in big power conflict. Therefore, India's change in posture constitutes a significant recalibration of which degree of non-alignment best suits Indian interests under the current conditions, rather than a wholesale abandonment of non-alignment. This way of thinking will make it easier to identify important overlaps in outlook between India and its Southeast Asian neighbors, particularly Vietnam.



With the need to balance China evasively holding India back from fully aligning with its fellow Quad members, the thesis now looks to ASEAN as a potential partner for India to externally balance against China's rise. To get to the core of the issue, the thesis will ask the following two questions: What is ASEAN's position on the Indo-Pacific and is it a suitable venue for pushing for Indian security interests in the IPR? Given Vietnam's membership in ASEAN, this will also important preliminary insights into how Vietnam can promote its interests in the framework of Southeast Asia's central multilateral institution.

#### 4.4 The Limitations of the ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership

ASEAN has been surprisingly slow to adopt the use of the Indo-Pacific framework and to define its position towards its contents. While Indonesia advanced a suggestion to adopt the concept as an overarching strategy for the region's foreign policy under the "Indo-Pacific Friendship and Cooperation Treaty" in 2013, this early suggestion was dropped. Instead, it took ASEAN until 2019 to come out with its 'Outlook on the Indo-Pacific' (AOIP).<sup>133</sup> The brief five-page document is very general with respect to the reason behind the adoption of the Indo-Pacific framework. As background considerations, the report names "geostrategic and geopolitical shifts" that stem from the "rise of material powers, i.e. economic and military" and that call for the avoidance of "patterns of behavior based on a zero-sum game".<sup>134</sup>

While the AOIP thus vaguely acknowledges the major changes that have been set into motion in the region by China's rise as well as India's need to react to this rise, it restricts itself to reiterating the core tenets of ASEAN, including its claim to regional centrality, inclusivity, non-interference and openness.<sup>135</sup> It states its lack of innovation rather clearly:

"This Outlook is not aimed at creating new mechanisms or replacing existing ones; rather, it is an Outlook intended to enhance ASEAN's Community building process and to strengthen and give new momentum for existing ASEAN-led mechanisms to better face

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<sup>133</sup> See p. 26 (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020).

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> See P. 2 (ASEAN, 2019).

challenges and seize opportunities arising from the current and future regional and global environments.”<sup>136</sup>

However, the AOIP does go beyond generalities in singling out some areas in which to concentrate efforts. These are maritime cooperation, connectivity, the United Nations SDGs and economic and social issues.<sup>137</sup> It is in its reference to maritime cooperation that the AOIP comes the closest to addressing some of the actual issues that have prompted India to subscribe to the Indo-Pacific framework. The document states:

“The existing and arising geopolitical challenges facing countries in the region also revolve around maritime issues such as unresolved maritime disputes that have the potential for open conflict.”<sup>138</sup>

It goes on to advocate for the settlement of such disputes in a cooperative way and in accordance to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which is to be read as an implicit critique of China’s expansionist stance in the South China Sea.<sup>139</sup>

There is thus some degree of overlap with India’s interests in maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Yet, the commitment is rather minimal and does not match the extent of India’s concerns about China’s more indirect power projection in its area of more immediate concern, namely the Indian Ocean. Here China’s

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<sup>136</sup> P. 1 (ASEAN, 2019).

<sup>137</sup> See p. 3 f. (ASEAN, 2019).

<sup>138</sup> P. 3 (ASEAN, 2019).

<sup>139</sup> See *ibid.*

involvement through investments and the development of port structures that could have dual civilian and military use and deployment of military vessels for the professed reason of fighting piracy are unlikely to trigger a clear reaction under a position defined by the general criteria stated in the AOIP.<sup>140</sup> Indian concerns about the Indian Ocean thus find little traction in the framework of the AOIP.

The area where there is a clearer convergence of the aspirations voiced in the AOIP and India's needs is in the field of economic development and India's enhanced integration into the Southeast Asian region. The AOIP somewhat exuberantly characterizes its goal in this area as "connecting the connectivities"<sup>141</sup>, but it goes on to break this down into the more tangible aspiration to increase the "integration and interconnection among Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean countries"<sup>142</sup>, which speaks directly to India's need to develop better transport networks going east to counter Chinese-led tendencies of encirclement to the North and West. Concretely, the AOIP wants to incorporate the 'Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025' into the broader Indo-Pacific region, a proposal that is credible insofar as it promises tangible benefits for all parties involved. Furthermore, the Outlook states the need to evaluate synergies with extant infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific, among which it explicitly lists the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), in which India is a major stakeholder.<sup>143</sup>

This convergence is of even greater importance for assessing India's future engagement with ASEAN as the Quad and the FOIP addresses economic issues only

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<sup>140</sup> See p. 24 (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020) and p. 17 (Jaishankar, 2019) for elaboration on these two causes of concern for India.

<sup>141</sup> P. 4 (ASEAN, 2019).

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> See *ibid.*

insofar as they want to ensure open navigation as a precondition of trade. The FOIP does not contain infrastructure initiatives or other comparable measures that could help India move along faster on its development trajectory. As is evident from its brief “Leaders’ Joint Statement: The Spirit of the Quad”, the same goes for the Quad. It focuses exclusively on security issues, albeit this is somewhat supplemented by the inclusion of a commitment to close cooperation with regard to developing and distributing efficient COVID-19 vaccines and more open venues like the Quad Plus.<sup>144</sup> This inclusion might be interpreted as a sign that at some point in the future the Quad might conceivably have a broader scope. Presently though, this is purely speculative.

While ASEAN’s AOIP falls a long way short of taking a stance on regional security that is invested enough to accommodate the whole of India’s interests, it can still be seen as a foundation for potentially fruitful interaction. A positive reception of the AOIP is evident from the continued support that the parties of the Quad have expressed in their ‘Leaders’ Statement’ by noting: “We reaffirm our strong support for ASEAN’s unity and centrality as well as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>145</sup> While such an endorsement might suggest that with the AOIP, ASEAN has provided a reading of the Indo-Pacific framework that is to everyone’s satisfaction. However, this statement has been made in the context of furthering the Quad, a forum that, notwithstanding the verbal bows, has goals that go far beyond the AOIP in their security ambitions. From the Indian perspective, the preceding two sections have shown that both the Quad and ASEAN are only partial answers for New Delhi’s need to balance against the rise of China. While the Quad has the necessary

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<sup>144</sup> See (The White House, 2021).

<sup>145</sup> (The White House, 2021).

resources and commitment, it is insensitive to India's approach of evasively balancing against China. ASEAN, on the other hand, while very much attuned to worries around upsetting China, is too non-comittal in its attempt to find a meaningful security posture in the Indo-Pacific.

This chapter has focused on reaching a deeper understanding of India's position from the past to the present. In order to do this, the chapter began by adopting a historical perspective and going into India's role in the NAM and its evolving interaction with Southeast Asia under the Look East and Act East policies. This has shown that India has increasingly shifted away from an idealist and towards a realist outlook in international relations, while also seeking deepened relations with its Southeast Asian neighbors. The historical lens was then exchanged for a look at Indian interests from the perspective of balancing China's rise, which yielded the need to balance China internally and externally, particularly in the maritime domain. Importantly, it also generated a partial explanation for why India has been perceived as holding back the Quad's potential for decisive action in its interest to balance China evasively. In a final step, the chapter saw only limited potential in ASEAN and its Indo-Pacific strategy to provide a suitable venue for India to engage in external balancing of China. While ASEAN's AOIP promises some interesting opportunities for India to deepen its economic ties, its vague take on the security dimension shows its limitations. In essence, what this shows is that India finds its particular interests only partially served by the existing multilateral forums. Having thus shown the shortcomings of the most important multilateral forums for accommodating India's

specific interests, the thesis now turns to the developing security partnership with Vietnam.

### **5. Vietnam's Outlook on Regional Affairs in the Indo-Pacific**

Vietnam's current position as one of the most dynamic economies in the region with a growing role in regional politics has been the result of extraordinarily adept planning on the side of the country's leadership. Only thirty years ago, in 1991, Vietnam found itself in a formidable crisis, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union took away its most reliable economic and military supporter. It was at the time still heavily sanctioned by the US and had only normalized its relations with its mighty Chinese neighbor months before the Soviet Union's collapse.<sup>146</sup> What is more, the country's relative international isolation and its many experiences with outside aggression, meant that it was overburdened with the need to provide for its national security. It hence spent a disproportionate amount of its resources on its military, employing around 2 million active military personnel in the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>147</sup> According to analysis by Le Dinh Tinh, the strategy that has made the transformation from an isolated and underdeveloped nation into an actor with growing regional impact possible was a combination of economic reforms under the Doi Moi policy, as well as broad diplomatic engagement.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> See p. 321 (Tinh, 2021).

<sup>147</sup> See p. 321 (Tinh, 2021).

<sup>148</sup> See p. 323 (Tinh, 2021).



The Lowy Institute’s Asia Power Index ranks Vietnam as the 12<sup>th</sup> most powerful country in Asia, classifying it as a middle power in the region.<sup>149</sup> The index acknowledges Vietnam’s strong growth potential and its expanding defense network as sources of its strength.<sup>150</sup> At the same time, it points out that “contested maritime boundaries in the South China Sea, and its proximity and legacy of interstate conflict with China, play into its geopolitical vulnerability”, thereby acting as limiters of Vietnamese power.<sup>151</sup>

This chapter complements the previous one on India, by investigating how its geopolitical vulnerability in the IPR shapes Vietnam’s interests and pushes it towards deepening security relations with India. As in the previous chapter, this also includes enquiry into Vietnam’s prospects of pushing for its agenda in the IPR in multilateral forums, most importantly the Quad in order to ascertain the context in which India-Vietnam cooperation is unfolding.

### **5.1 Vietnam’s Interests and Security Outlook in its Defence White Papers**

In order to come to an assessment on the national interests and goals of Vietnam, the present chapter focuses on the two most recent Defence White Papers published by Vietnam’s Ministry of National Defence in 2009 and 2019.<sup>152</sup> As the most comprehensive official publications on the issue of defense, these two documents convey a clear idea of Vietnam’s security outlook. The analysis of these two official

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<sup>149</sup> (Lowy Institute, 2021 b)

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> The thesis will follow the British spelling ‘defence’ where it directly refers to uses of this word within Vietnamese or Indian sources as their documents use this spelling. In all other cases, the American spelling of ‘defense’ is used, consistent with the thesis generally following American spelling conventions.

documents is supplemented by reference to important think tank and scholarly publications where appropriate.

Published on the 65<sup>th</sup> and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) the 2009 and 2019 Defence White Papers give important insights into the country's strategic outlook in security matters. Both papers are introduced by forewords that refer to Vietnam's long history of pursuing internal stability and peaceful relations in the face of external aggression. While the 2009 version refers to the wars that the VPA has fought since its foundation in 1944, the 2019 paper refers to the even longer history of the Vietnamese people in dealing with outside aggression and attempts to undermine their independence.<sup>153</sup> Such historic references set the tone of the two documents insofar as they speak to Vietnam's sense of self-reliance in defense matters and draw a line of continuity from the past need for vigilance to Vietnam's current challenges.

The publications, available both in Vietnamese and English, serve to simultaneously communicate inwardly to the Vietnamese people, as well as laying out Vietnam's position for outside countries to see.<sup>154</sup> In the words of the 2009 White Paper, the document stems from

“(...) the desire of the Vietnamese people and the VPA for advancing mutual understanding and trust with other peoples and armed forces so as to further foster cooperation for the sake of peace, national independence and social progress.”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> See p. 7 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2009) and p. 5 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019) respectively.

<sup>154</sup> See p. 6 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019)

<sup>155</sup> P. 9 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2009).

With the follow-up publication ten years later pursuing the same objective, and introducing explicitly the idea of confidence building:

After the 2009 National Defence White Paper, Viet Nam releases the 2019 National Defence White Paper to continually affirm and elucidate the fundamental nature of peace and self-defence of Viet Nam's national defence. (...) The 2019 Viet Nam National Defence White Paper seeks to promote better understanding and confidence building between Viet Nam and other countries in the international community.<sup>156</sup>

Taking these statements at face value, the intent of communicating to the Vietnamese people as well as to the broader international community the essence of Vietnam's security outlook makes these two white papers excellent sources for the present thesis. They will serve as a first-hand window into the national interests and strategic outlook held in Hanoi. Consequently, this chapter will take the white papers as a source to answer the following two questions: Firstly, what are the core national interests of Vietnam as laid out by the white papers? And secondly, what strategy is Vietnam following to secure these interests? Coming from the previous chapter and its focus on India, these two points about Vietnam's position will allow us to form a better understanding of where the two nations have overlapping interests and how they might work together towards them.

Turning first to the question of national interests, the reference to "peace, national independence and social progress" in the statements of intent quoted above already constitutes a brief list of the fundamental goals that Vietnam is pursuing with its

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<sup>156</sup> P. 6 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019) for this double function.

defense strategy.<sup>157</sup> Throughout the White Papers, these broad goals are further clarified. For example, in the following statement:

“Vietnam always regards the maintenance of peaceful and stable environment for socio-economic development, industrialization and modernization, building the socialism-oriented market economy as the top national interest, and the consistent goal of its national defence policy.”<sup>158</sup>

This reiterates the commitment to peace and contextualizes it with the further ‘top national interest’ to keep Vietnam on its recent trajectory of dynamic economic development that has been a result of the Doi Moi reform process. After the destruction of the Vietnam War and the severe socio-economic consequences of the following diplomatic isolation, this is showing Vietnam’s awareness that the country’s growing prosperity is founded on stable peace in the region. Vietnam’s economic growth is therefore conditional on the maintenance of regional stability in the IPR.

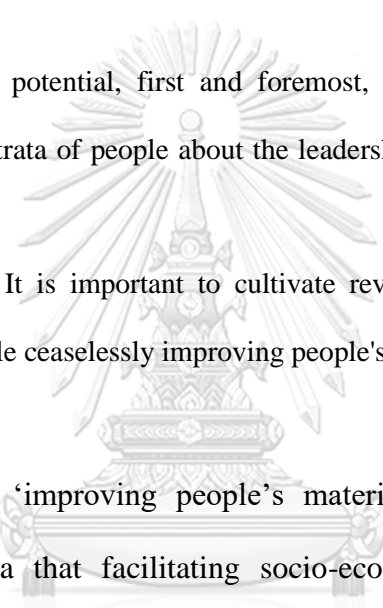
The high significance that Vietnam ascribes to the nexus of peace and socio-economic development makes a lot of sense if we take the country’s internal political system into consideration. As analysis by Carlyle Thayer has shown, the position of the VCP as the sole political party in the country should not be taken to imply that there is no accountability of the political leadership towards the interests of the people as well as the elites. As Thayer puts it, “(t)he ability of the party to lead, let alone exert control, in all spheres of society has been undermined by both elite and societal pressures”,

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<sup>157</sup> P. 9 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2009).

<sup>158</sup> P. 18 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2009).

implying that the VCP needs to pay close attention to its sources of legitimacy.<sup>159</sup> First and foremost, such legitimacy is drawn from effectively delivering on the core goals of “economic growth, and the maintenance of political stability for society at large”, resulting in what Thayer calls the “performance legitimacy” of the VCP.<sup>160</sup> The accuracy of Thayer’s analysis is borne out by the 2019 White Paper, which clearly accedes to the need to strengthen the VCP’s leadership role within the country:


 Building political potential, first and foremost, requires building confidence and consensus of all strata of people about the leadership of the CPV and the success of national defence and construction. It is important to cultivate revolutionary virtue, patriotism, and national pride while ceaselessly improving people's material and spiritual lives.<sup>161</sup>

The mention made of ‘improving people’s material and spiritual lives’ clearly resonates with the idea that facilitating socio-economic progress is crucial. In prioritizing the nexus of peace and socio-economic development, the White Paper exhibits the VCP’s commitment to the welfare of its people and the ambition to living up the implicit promise of Vietnam’s socialist system to lift its population from poverty towards an improved standard of living.

Besides that, there is also the stabilizing function that sustained economic growth and improvements of well-being have for the country’s political system. The connection of regional stability to sustained economic growth is also borne out by the fact that the big power competition between the US and China also contains a significant

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<sup>159</sup> P. 424 (Thayer, 2010).

<sup>160</sup> P. 440 (Thayer, 2010).

<sup>161</sup> P. 36 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019).

economic component that is evident in the “trade war” between the two, shows the many linkage points of security concerns and economic politics.<sup>162</sup>

Consequently, the incipient efforts to decouple certain crucial supply chains in the US and China, that have been one of the upshots of the trade war and the Covid-19 pandemic, are a two-edged sword from the Vietnamese perspective.<sup>163</sup> While Vietnam might stand to profit economically from the geopolitically motivated shifting of supply chains away from China, Hanoi can only hope for such gains up to a certain point. Should the bipolarity between the US and China escalate to the point of overt aggression, Vietnam’s exposed geographical position at the rim of the SCS in proximity to the other potential flashpoints in the Strait of Taiwan and the East China Sea implies that any positive trend would revert. For as soon as aggressions threaten to spill over from SCS or other flashpoints, those investors seeking to insulate their production lines against geopolitical risks would move elsewhere, further away from potential points of conflict. Escalating tensions between Beijing and the US hence only have a limited upside, making continued stability a much desirable situation for Hanoi. The goal of keeping Vietnam’s neighborhood stable to ensure good conditions for sustained economic growth is therefore supported from the internal perspective of the VCP’s legitimacy as well as from the point of view of stabilizing economic growth from the point of view of the ongoing trade war between China and the US.

While the previous point shows how economic considerations shape Vietnam’s security policy through the VCP’s need to establish internal legitimacy and the nexus of peace and socio-economic development, the White Papers clearly exhibit another

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<sup>162</sup> (Rudd, *The Trade War, Economic Decoupling, and Future Chinese Strategy Towards America*, 2019).

<sup>163</sup> See (Liu, Ly, Sieg, & Simanin, 2020)

coupled pair of concerns that fall more squarely into the sphere of security politics and the purview of the balance of power, namely independence and territorial integrity. Accordingly, the interest to “firmly defend independence, sovereignty, territorial unity and integrity” is presented as a part of the central national interests and as a goal of the “Strategy to Safeguard the Homeland”.<sup>164</sup>

As the main threat to Vietnam’s territorial integrity is clearly China, most importantly through its claims in the SCS, the White Papers gives a very instructive insight into the delicate balance that the Vietnamese defense planners are trying to strike between assertively stating their interests while avoiding confrontational rhetoric. The following section provides a good example:

“Divergences between Viet Nam and China regarding sovereignty in the East Sea are of historical existence, which need to be settled with precaution, avoiding negative impacts on general peace, friendship, and cooperation for development between the two countries. The resolution of disputes in the East Sea is a long-term, difficult and complex process, involving multiple countries and parties. The two countries should continue negotiations and consultations to find peaceful solutions on the basis of international law.”<sup>165</sup>

While China is singled out by name, the section does not lay any blame on its side. Instead, the ‘divergences’ in the East Sea, Vietnam’s way of referring to the South China Sea, are sketched in a neutral and symmetrical way. Furthermore, the need to avoid sacrifices in the two countries’ economic relations and even their ‘friendship’ is

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<sup>164</sup> P. 20 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019).

<sup>165</sup> P. 16 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019).

immediately referenced and the plea to keep up negotiations is made in a way that refers to both sides, again avoiding laying blame on China's side. However, another section further on chooses much stronger language and clearly blames Vietnam's competitors in the SCS for their behavior:

“New developments in the East Sea, including unilateral actions, power-based coercion, violations of international law, militarisation, change in the status quo, and infringement upon Viet Nam's sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction as provided in international law, have undermined the interests of nations concerned and threatened peace, stability, security, safety, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the region.”<sup>166</sup>

The charges made clearly refer to the Beijing's grey zone tactics and their efforts to muscle through their territorial claims in the SCS, yet they avoid mentioning China by name.<sup>167</sup> In effect, this shows that Vietnam is clearly unhappy about China's aggressive approach and its disregard for Vietnam's sovereignty. Furthermore, the allusion made to the 'interests of nations concerned' and 'violations of international law' underscores that Vietnam perceives that it is not alone in being alarmed by China's actions and instead shares the broad interests in regional stability with most other stakeholders.

When comparing the 2009 White Paper with the 2019 version, it is clear that the core interests as well as the fundamental concerns of Vietnam's security outlook show strong continuity, with an enduring focus on independence and internal stability under

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<sup>166</sup> P. 19 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019).

<sup>167</sup> See p. 453 ff. (Govella, 2021) for elaboration on China's use of gray zone tactics to push through its claims in the SCS.



the governance of the VCP as well as a broader concern for regional stability that is conducive for continued socio-economic development. Beyond such continuity, the 2019 paper also exhibits a clear awareness of the shifts in the external conditions in which Vietnam is pursuing these interests. The following synoptical statement makes this clear:

“Viet Nam's National Defence Strategy is the backbone, realising the Strategy to Safeguard the Homeland in the new situation aimed at firmly defending independence, sovereignty, territorial unity and integrity of the country, safeguarding national interests both inside and outside the territory, preserving sustainable peace of the country, protecting the Party, State, and people, actively contributing to the maintenance of peace and stability in the region and the world, and securing political stability and a peaceful environment for national construction and development.”<sup>168</sup>

With the interests so clearly stated, the mention of a ‘Strategy to Safeguard the Homeland’ as a way to secure Vietnam’s interests in the ‘new situation’, bridges over from the elaboration of national interests to the sphere of strategy and raises the further question of what strategy Vietnam intends to follow in securing its national interests. In broad terms, the White Papers suggest a two-pronged approach, consisting of strengthening Vietnam’s own defense capabilities and also deepening ties with security partners, or, to put it in realist terms, a combination of internal and external balancing. The following section from the 2009 White Paper exhibits this dual approach clearly:

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<sup>168</sup> P. 22 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019).

Vietnam builds national defence power mainly upon its own resources and people.  
(...)

At the same time, Vietnam attaches great importance to developing defence ties with all other countries on the basis of respect for each other's independence, sovereignty and mutual benefit. Vietnam highly values defence cooperation with neighbouring countries, and traditional friends while developing defence links with other countries sharing the goal of peace, independence and development.<sup>169</sup>

The need to bring together improvements of domestic defense capacities and the strengthening of relations with suitable partners is not very noteworthy on its own, as it is a common feature of defense planning for virtually all countries around the world. But while there is little difference between the way in which the two papers portray the national interests of Vietnam, the strategic dimension is where the two White Papers exhibit a subtle but important shift that occurred between 2009 and 2019 in Vietnam's security outlook:

Firstly, Vietnam is not willing to back down as a result of Chinese intimidation and instead is finding clearer words to express its concerns in this area. This, according to security Analysts Derek Grossmann and Christian Sharman, is already evident in the fact that the 2019 White Paper mentions China by name twice as often as did the 2009 version, showing the readiness to mention concerns more openly, even at the risk of irritating Beijing.<sup>170</sup> Secondly, Grossmann and Sharman argue convincingly that the 2019 White Paper is showing some openness towards deepening security cooperation

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<sup>169</sup> P. 21 f. (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2009).

<sup>170</sup> The 2019 White Paper mentions 'China' eight times within its main text, three times of which in a negative context, while 2009 version only mentions 'China' by name four times and completely avoids such direct reference in negative contexts. See (Grossman & Sharman, How to Read Vietnam's Latest Defense White Paper: A Message to Big Powers, 2019) for elaboration on this point.

with the US.<sup>171</sup> This is evident, so their reasoning, in the use of the Indo-Pacific concept with its connotations of the US-backed FOIP. And indeed, the way in which the Indo-Pacific is referred to is quite clearly to be read as a warning to China to stop pushing Vietnam into closer alignment with the US. The relevant section reads:

“Viet Nam is ready to participate in security and defence cooperation mechanisms suitable to its capabilities and interests, including security and defence mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region as well as those of the European Union and the United Nations.”<sup>172</sup>

As has been elaborated above, the Indo-Pacific framework, particularly when used in combination with reference to ‘security and defence mechanisms’ is strongly suggestive of the FOIP and the Quad, both of which are geared against China’s rise and also perceived by Beijing accordingly, as the above investigation of the Quad has shown.

Another analyst has been critical of Vietnam’s strategy as outlined in the 2019, arguing that it remains too conservative in trying to adjust to the changes in the country’s geopolitical environment and that it fails to go beyond Vietnam’s long-held preoccupation with autonomy.<sup>173</sup> This criticism perceives a lack of adjustment in the scope and ambition of national policies and strategic outlook, making Vietnam’s vision fall behind its expanding size and potential reach. Nguyen sees Vietnam falling

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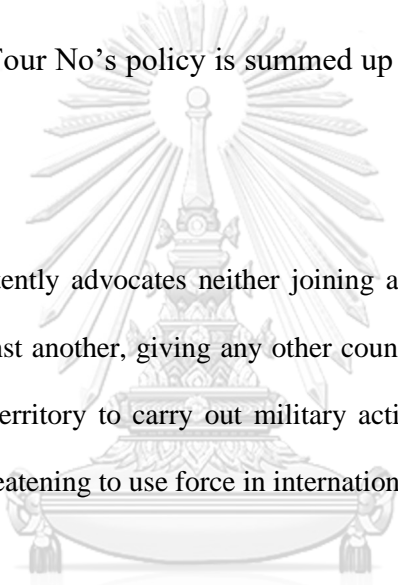
<sup>171</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> P. 29 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019).

<sup>173</sup> See (Nguyen T. , 2020).

prey to a “false choice” between autonomy and the forming of fully fledged alliances.<sup>174</sup>

While such sections as the one quoted above, where readiness to participate in defense cooperation is emphasized, do somewhat undermine Nguyen’s criticism, the broader charge that Vietnam’s security position remains too non-committal finds some support in the so-called Three No’s policy that has been promoted by Vietnam already in its 2009 White Paper and that has evolved into the Four No’s Policy in the 2019 version. The extended Four No’s policy is summed up in the following section, which reads:



Viet Nam consistently advocates neither joining any military alliances, siding with one country against another, giving any other countries permission to set up military bases or use its territory to carry out military activities against other countries nor using force or threatening to use force in international relations.<sup>175</sup>

Here, Vietnam commits itself to refraining from joining military alliances, forming coalitions aimed against particular countries and from giving permission to other nations to set up military bases in Vietnam. A new addition compared to the 2009 version is the further fourth commitment to refraining from using force in international relations. This further commitment has been interpreted as an additional attempt to preclude violent escalation in any disagreements with China in the SCS.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> P. 23 f. (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019).

<sup>176</sup> See (Grossman & Sharman, How to Read Vietnam's Latest Defense White Paper: A Message to Big Powers, 2019).

At first glance the self-constriction that comes with the Four No's policy might not make a lot of sense, as one might expect Vietnam striving to keep the maximum freedom in making its foreign policy decisions. However, with such a disproportionate neighbor as China, much of Hanoi's efforts in the sphere of international politics are gauged towards reassuring Beijing of Vietnam's benign intentions and thereby stabilizing bilateral relations. It thus makes sense to read the Four No's with their focus on peace and abstinence from violence or acts of provocation as reassurances that Vietnam will not take any brazen actions that would undermine Chinese interests, particularly by bringing in the US and other competitors of China more deeply into regional affairs by entering into a formal alliance with them or allowing them to operate military bases in Vietnam.

If this interpretation of the motivation behind the Four No's is correct, then their utility lies in increasing the threshold of escalation in China-Vietnam relations by functioning as an assurance that Vietnam does not seek to attack China by use of force or by ganging up with other nations. By subscribing to the Four No's Vietnam is implicitly committing itself to upholding the peaceful way of conducting international relations that it would like to see reflected in its region as it will lead to the kind of regional environment that will allow it to further develop socio-economically. Minding China's dominant role in Vietnam's security outlook and its recent attempts to unilaterally shift the regional order, it is plausible that Beijing is the main addressee of the message implicit in the Four No's.

If we take into consideration that China is repeatedly challenging the territorial integrity of Vietnam, which the White Papers consider a core national interest, this raises the question if the reading just given of the Four No's policy is plausible. For –

and that appears to be the point of critique made by Nguyen of Vietnam's current approach to security— if China is overtly ignoring international law and conventions of peaceful international conduct, then the type of appeasement that Vietnam is seeking through its emphasis of restraint, non-violence and self-sufficiency equates to committing itself to lagging behind China's strategy of incremental escalation insofar as it fails to recruit reliable partners in pushing back in the SCS and elsewhere.<sup>177</sup>

In evaluating this issue, it is crucial to distinguish two questions that are easily confused, both of which are ultimately important in answering the question of why we are seeing a deepening of India and Vietnam security relations. Firstly, does it make sense to read the Four No's and Vietnam's broader security policy as outlined in the White Papers as geared towards reassuring Beijing of Vietnam's benign security outlook? Secondly, can such an approach actually succeed in protecting Vietnamese interests against Chinese assertiveness?

In support of answering yes to the first question, despite the sustained Chinese disregard of Vietnam's territorial interests, it is instructive to consider an important caveat that limits the extent of the Four No's Policy. It reads: "Depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Viet Nam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defence and military relations with other countries", thereby introducing for the first time "a causal linkage between the deterioration of Vietnam's external security environment and the nations with which it chooses to deepen defense cooperation".<sup>178</sup> Hence we are seeing in the caveat added to the Four No's in the 2019 version of the Defence White Paper a reaction to China's continued bullying that

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<sup>177</sup> See (Nguyen T. , 2020).

<sup>178</sup> P. 24 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019) for the original source of the quoted section from the Security White Paper 2019 and (Grossman & Sharman, How to Read Vietnam's Latest Defense White Paper: A Message to Big Powers, 2019) for their interpretation of the section.

supports the reading that the self-restraint was imposed with the original intention of supporting common understanding with Beijing. Beyond such textual evidence that Vietnam is intentionally maintaining its relatively conservative security policy as a way to reassure Beijing of its broadly benevolent intentions is that by shying away from entering alliances or doing anything else that could be taken as a more substantial challenge to Beijing, it can actually act more assertively in pushing back against Chinese advances in the limited arena of the SCS.<sup>179</sup> Vietnam is after all the ASEAN state that is resisting Chinese expansion in the SCS the most fiercely. It is likely that is in part due to the credible assurance that Vietnam will not engage in any action that substantially challenges other Chinese interests, that it can act decisively in trying to protect its interests in the SCS without further escalating Sino-Vietnamese relations.

As for the second question of whether self-imposed limitations and assurances to Beijing can work as a strategy to protect Vietnamese interests against Chinese expansion, this is a complicated issue that applies in some form or other to many of the smaller countries in China's sphere of influence. While it is very difficult to say to which extent this approach to dealing with China 'evasively' can work, the above-mentioned caveat of making future Vietnamese defense partnerships conditional on the development of its security environment signals that such a conservative approach is not set in stone in the eyes of the Vietnamese leadership. As Grossman and Sharman read it, the indications that there are limits to how far Vietnam is willing to get pushed before changing gears and seeking deeper security partnerships signals not only Vietnamese determination not to be pushed around, but also a "potential

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<sup>179</sup> In this vein, it is instructive to see the affirmation of Vietnam's commitment to the Four No's by Vietnam's Minister of National Defense. See (Minh, 2020).

opportunity to the United States” as “Vietnam might finally promote America’s status to that of a “strategic partnership” – signaling mutual long-term interest to balance against China”.<sup>180</sup>

While this is a valid way of reading the 2019 White Paper, it is also exemplary of how focus on big power bipolarity is limiting much of the debate on the issue. By seeing in any warning sent towards China a chance for its big power rival, the US, such research leaves out the possibility that there might be other partnerships outside China-US bipolarity that can make an important contribution in Vietnam’s security outlook. As the present thesis argues India is such a partner for bilateral security cooperation, one that could help Vietnam form a more balanced security position and avoid antagonizing China while strengthening its position beyond mere self-reliance. This is because the convergence of interest that Grossman and Sharman see between Vietnam and the US is reached even deeper when we compare the national interests of Vietnam and a fellow regional developing state like India. This is even more relevant as contrary to the critique of Hanoi being self-absorbed, the strategy laid out in the White Papers, particularly in the 2019 version, reflects an awareness of the importance of external balancing by security cooperation, as it includes many passages that go beyond self-reliance, such as the following:

“(Vietnam’s) Defence Strategy seeks to establish and strengthen relations and strategic trust with countries, particularly strategic partners, with a view to forming

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<sup>180</sup> (Grossman & Sharman, How to Read Vietnam's Latest Defense White Paper: A Message to Big Powers, 2019); quotation marks around “strategic partnership” in the original.



the position for safeguarding the Homeland and being ready to defeat any forms of wars of foreign invasion should they occur.”<sup>181</sup>

With its focus on collaboration at the level of strategic partners, which includes India but excludes the US, this is also in the spirit of improving Vietnam’s security position outside of the big-power polarity and speaks to the need to extend the focus of investigation accordingly.

In Conclusion, the investigation of Vietnam’s Defence White Papers has yielded a deepened understanding of the country’s national interests, which center around the continued leadership of the VCP of a territorially secure country in conditions of sustained socio-economic development achieved in a stable and peaceful Indo-Pacific region. It has also shown Vietnam’s strategy shaped by the need to find a delicate balance between avoiding antagonizing Beijing while also developing the defense potential to resist the threats to core national interests that emanate from its big northern neighbor. Just as the lens of big power bipolarity is useful in casting into clear relief the central strategic fault lines that Vietnam is facing, it is also a potential obstacle in seeing the opportunities that other partnerships hold, like the one with India. While analysts have seen a chance for deepened US-Vietnam relations on the basis of shared long-term interests, this does not fully grasp the inescapable need of Vietnam and other smaller nations in Southeast Asia to live with China and its overwhelming influence. Put differently, there remains a central point in which the interest of Vietnam and the interests of the US do not align, and that is in the degree

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<sup>181</sup> P. 22 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019); Word in brackets not in the original, added for easier comprehension.

of Chinese push-back that the two are able to risk. India on the other hand, while not a claimant in the SCS, also shares a disputed land border with China. Its history in the non-aligned movement also means that India, unlike the US does not have a strongly developed alliance system that can efficiently buffer punitive Chinese reactions. Taking fully into account the restrictions under which Vietnam is operating, with its geography and limited economic and military clout, the 2019 White Paper reveals a balanced security posture. To be sure, in some sections there remains a strong focus on independence and self-sufficiency. But other sections show an awareness of the importance of balancing through suitable partnerships and multilateral forums. The thesis will now follow up on the state of both these strands of Vietnam's policies by first going into its options in multilateral forums in the next section and then studying the evolution of its bilateral security partnership with India in the following chapter.

## **5.2 Vietnam and Multilateral Forums: The Quad and Others as Venues for Vietnamese Interests**

Vietnam's 2019 Defence White Paper contains a clear endorsement of multilateral forums for pursuing its national security:

Viet Nam promotes multilateral defence cooperation with a view to contributing to ensuring national defence, security, and national sovereignty.<sup>182</sup>

As a clear commitment to the need for external balancing, this raises a number of questions about which forum would be a suitable venue for Vietnam to further its specific national interests in a multilateral forum. This chapter will thus investigate

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<sup>182</sup> P. 27 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019).

the three available forums with a focus on the IPR –ASEAN, the Quad and AUKUS—regarding their suitability to serve as a forum to further Vietnam’s needs.

Given Vietnam’s membership in ASEAN and taking into consideration ASEAN’s claim of centrality for regional affairs, this is the first venue to come to mind. However, as David Shambaugh’s schematic display of the foreign policy position of ASEAN nations referred to in chapter two above shows, Vietnam is more assertive in positioning itself against Beijing than any of its ASEAN neighbors.<sup>183</sup> Considering the association’s principle of reaching decisions consensually, this implies that any ASEAN-led security initiatives will not carry enough bite to adequately represent Vietnamese interests. It remains to be seen whether the recent ASEAN-US Special Summit in Washington will give the impulse to shift the association towards taking a more balanced stance regarding the US-China competition.<sup>184</sup> However, major repositing notwithstanding, ASEAN is unlikely to adopt strong enough positions to reflect Vietnam’s position on IPR security anytime soon.

Thus setting ASEAN aside, Vietnam’s membership in the Quad Plus arrangement raises the question if Hanoi could join the Quad as a full member in the future. Given that the Quad has the Indo-Pacific as its geographical area of focus, it is an interesting question to consider whether Vietnam would be interested in joining the partnership as a multilateral platform that is more decisive and agile on matters of security relevance than ASEAN. And from the point of view of the Quad, Vietnam’s relatively assertive line makes it stand out among Southeast Asian nations, should the four original members see the need to gain more regional traction in their focus area. To come to any conclusions on this, there are two sides to be considered in this, namely

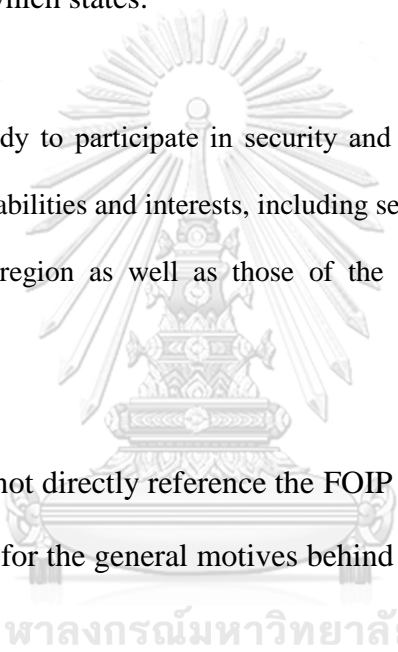
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<sup>183</sup> See p. 243 (Shambaugh, 2020).

<sup>184</sup> See (Strangio, 2022).

the added value that Vietnamese membership would offer to the four original Quad partners, as well as the benefit of such an accession for Vietnam itself. In both directions, there are important benefits as well as detriments that would come with a formal membership of Vietnam in the Quad.

As already mentioned above, Vietnam, while somewhat more hesitant than India, has included a supportive reference to the Indo-Pacific framework in its 2019 National Defence White Paper, which states:



“Viet Nam is ready to participate in security and defence cooperation mechanisms suitable to its capabilities and interests, including security and defence mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region as well as those of the European Union and the United Nations.”<sup>185</sup>

While the section does not directly reference the FOIP that underlies the Quad, it does at least show sympathy for the general motives behind US-led reframing the region as the Indo-Pacific.

However, even considering a Vietnamese Quad-membership might be a non-starter because of its Four No’s policy. As seen above, one of the four No’s precludes joining together with others against a third party. As elaborated above, the Quad is not an anti-China alliance narrowly defined, but rather aims at pursuing the positive goal of protecting the rules-based status quo in the SCS and the wider IPR. This is a goal that is hard to object to, particularly given Vietnam’s preexisting commitment to also uphold the rules-based order in the IPR that is implicit in its Security White Papers.

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<sup>185</sup> P. 29 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019).

Hence, while it ultimately comes down to a matter of interpretation, membership in the Quad plausibly does not fall under Vietnam's provision under the Four No's. What is more, as elaborated above, the provision to abstain from cooperating against another country is not set in stone. The rationale behind the voluntary preclusion of partnering with other nations against a third one consists of assuring China that it need not fear Vietnam joining others in ganging up on it. Yet, should Chinese aggression in the South China Sea continue to escalate, such reassurances would lose much of their value. Vietnam would then likely reconsider its position on this and become more affirmative in embracing like-minded partnerships. Put differently, if the Four No's are a strategic move by Vietnam to reassure China of Vietnam's benign intentions and thereby help in founding amiable relations between Beijing and Hanoi, then such a strategy will only be useful if it is reciprocated by Beijing. However, should Beijing undermine the foundations of amiable relations with Hanoi by pushing ever harder against Vietnam's fundamental security interests, there would be no reason for Vietnam to consider itself bound to the Four No's anymore. So even if the Vietnamese leadership currently deemed the anti-China element in the Quad's outlook strong enough to stay away from it under the Four No's policy, there is clearly a possible future scenario in which such a restriction would become irrelevant.

A further basic factor that might be deemed a major obstacle for considering Vietnam as a potential member of the Quad is its political system, namely the fact that it is run as a single-party communist state. This is because the four present members of the Quad are all democracies, a fact that also spills over into some of their public statements. Taking the statement published after the Quad leaders' first in-person summit in September 2021 as an indicator of the weight that the grouping accords to

democracy, one can find three references to democracy in the document.<sup>186</sup> However, two of these are made in connection to condemning the 2021 coup in Myanmar, where a democratically elected government was overthrown by the military, which lead to widespread protests by the population and the military's campaign of violent suppression. In such a context a call for "restoration of democracy" by the Quad leaders is a rather predictable move, not necessarily implying that the partnership itself takes the spread of democracy as one of its core goals.<sup>187</sup> The third reference that is made is more telling, as it lists "democratic values" as one of the things that the Quad partners stand for.

In judging how deep the Quad's commitment to democracy really is, two factors are instructive: Firstly, it is noteworthy that the Quad chose to use the more general phrasing of "democratic values" over the more direct "democracy", opening some room for interpretation. Secondly, it must be noted that among the Quad countries, the form that democracy takes in each case is far from homogenous. Particularly the state of democracy in India has recently given rise to worries as it has been displaying a prolific case of democratic backsliding.<sup>188</sup> This has been evident in the rise of a Hindu-centered type of ethnic nationalism that is harnessed by the Modi administration, and it also found expression in the way human rights were undermined in the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>189</sup> This trend has also manifested itself in India sliding back from being rated as a "free" society to being considered only "partly free" in 2021 according to the NGO Freedom House.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> See (The White House, 2021).

<sup>187</sup> (The White House, 2021)

<sup>188</sup> See, among others, (Kugelman, 2021) and (Vaishnav, 2021).

<sup>189</sup> See (Ozturk, 2021).

<sup>190</sup> See (Freedom House, 2021).

Freedom House's indicator, which uses a weighted scale of political rights and civil liberties to determine the state of freedom and democracy in a society, has been falling successively in the last four years, leading to India's downgrade to being now considered only "partly free".<sup>191</sup> In spite of this negative trend, the other three Quad members, all of which are ranked as "free" according to Freedom House's indicator, have not let criticism of Modi's erosion of Indian democracy stand in the way of deepened cooperation within the partnership. As one observer noted for the specific case of the US's reaction to democratic backsliding in India: "(T)he United States deems it more important to cooperate with India rather than criticize its domestic policies".<sup>192</sup> The same apparently holds true of Japan and Australia, neither of whom seems to be willing to let concerns over India's domestic politics stand in the way of pursuing shared interest in the IPR.

Granted, even after the recent regressive trend in India, the state of political rights and civil liberties remains at a much higher level than in Vietnam, which is categorized as "not free", the lowest denomination in Freedom House's index.<sup>193</sup> However, it is very plausible that a pragmatic pursuit of shared interests in the Indo-Pacific would trump concerns around democratic rights when it comes to interacting with Hanoi. Evidence in that direction can be seen in the deepening bilateral relations between the Quad members and Vietnam, as well as in Vietnam's inclusion in the Quad Plus mechanism. On the role of shared systems of democratic governance for the Quad, another researcher commented that "the democratic condition of the four members is

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<sup>191</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> (Vaishnav, 2021).

<sup>193</sup> See (Freedom House, 2022).

near irrelevant”, further supporting the reading that its type of governance would not be an insurmountable obstacle to full Quad membership.<sup>194</sup>

A further reason to doubt whether domestic politics and the status of democracy inside any of the member countries would seriously obstruct the membership of a new country in the Quad is to be found in history. If we take the example of the US, we can see a long-standing practice of being willing to work with autocrats, as long as their alignment with the US’s central national interests was ensured.<sup>195</sup> It can thus be argued that there are no principles or insurmountable obstacles for Vietnam to become a Quad member. Hence, an evaluation of the nation’s potential role in the Quad needs to consider the substantial benefits and drawbacks of such a step.

From Vietnam’s perspective, the potential upside of a membership in the Quad would clearly be a deepened partnership with very strong military and economic powers that share Vietnam’s interest in maintaining the status-quo in the Indo-Pacific and that want to maintain the open environment that has allowed Vietnam to develop and integrate as a fast-growing part of the global economy. A membership in the Quad would likely also come with benefits for the bilateral relations with the other Quad members, thereby paying economic and security dividends. It would thereby suit Vietnam’s general approach of reaching out to diverse partners in the region and provide a certain degree of insulation against Chinese aggression, particularly in the SCS that lies at the heart of the Quad’s concerns in the FOIP. It might also facilitate joint military cooperation with the Quad members, such as participating in joint naval training like India’s Malabar exercise.

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<sup>194</sup> P. 295 (Kliem, 2020).

<sup>195</sup> To point to one of many possible examples, the American support for Chilean dictator Pinochet is a clear case in which the US was willing to overlook striking human rights abuses and an anti-democratic government, as long as it saw its broader regional interests served. See p. 495 (Figueroa Clark, 2015).



However, such potential benefits must be weighed against the punitive reaction by Beijing that would all but certainly follow Vietnam's accession to the Quad. Even though as argued above, a case can be made that accession to the Quad is not precluded by the Four No's policy, it would be perceived as such by China. With Chinese sentiment on the Quad being very critical and seeing it as an attempt to contain what they consider their legitimate rise, the relevance of arguing that the Quad is just pushing for the realization of goals that Hanoi has been committed to for a long time is very limited. Therefore, joining the Quad would equate to abandoning the Four No's policy and the implicit attempt at finding a de-escalatory approach towards Hanoi-Beijing relations. Keeping in mind Vietnam's economic dependence on China and its relative military weakness, such a move would only make sense if the purpose behind the reconciliatory Four No's is frustrated by China first. For example, if Beijing were to make a very drastic aggressive move in the South China Sea that would clearly show an intent to escalate bilateral relations, then Hanoi would have a clear incentive to seek full membership in the Quad. However, judging from China's past employment of incremental subversion of Vietnamese interests in the SCS it is very unlikely that we will see such a clear and drastic move by Beijing. Instead, it should be expected that China will continue to only incrementally intensify its escalation in the SCS, thereby avoiding sending a clear signal that could be taken as the reason for a reversal of Hanoi's approach. Any step that the Chinese side will take in pushing for their interests is likely to be tailored in such a way that Hanoi reacting by turning to seeking membership in the Quad will seem disproportionate and give Beijing the option to lay the burden of aggression at Hanoi's feet. The bite of this strategic problem is aggravated for Hanoi, as the Quad in its present form is far from

being a formal alliance with reciprocal defense obligations. In other words, it is not clear to which extent Vietnamese membership would work towards deterring punitive aggression by Beijing.

Another feature with ambivalent implications that distinguishes Vietnam from the present Quad members is its geographic position in Southeast Asia and its concomitant membership in ASEAN. Because of this geographic position, its economic and security exposure to China is much bigger than that of the present Quad members. While India and Japan also have active points of contention about territorial issues with China, their significant military theft and more diversified trade partners offer a much bigger degree of autonomy compared to Vietnam. Furthermore, the one-sided nature of the economic balance between Vietnam and China is also of a different nature than the relations of the current Quad members. As Frederick Kliem has described the original four Quad members in a recent journal article, “all four are economically resilient enough not to asymmetrically depend on China”.<sup>196</sup> Vietnam’s economic dependence on China implies that it needs to be very careful in joining any initiatives of the partnership that would antagonize China. This need to carefully gauge any step with regard to the risk of Chinese retaliation implies that it Vietnamese membership would complicate decision making within the partnership. As the Quad’s *raison d’être* arguably lies in being comparatively decisive and closely aligned in order to counter Chinese economic and military coercion, the crucial drawback of letting Vietnam join in the partnership lies in increasing the threshold any decisive action that could antagonize Beijing. Vietnam is presently neither economically nor militarily strong enough to make up for bringing such drawbacks to the Quad.

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<sup>196</sup> P. 295 (Kliem, 2020).

In summary, it is currently neither in Hanoi's interest nor in the interest of the four Quad members to have Vietnam become a full member in the partnership. The Vietnam's current engagement in the Quad Plus is a middle ground much more suitable to the current extent of strategic overlap between the Quad and Vietnam. It allows for some exchange on strategic security matters in the IPR, while nominally focusing on the evolving challenges around the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>197</sup>

The issues that stand against Vietnam presently joining the Quad are even more pronounced when it comes to considering the other recent multilateral forum with a security focus in the IPR, namely AUKUS. As elaborated above, this is an even more homogenous grouping than the Quad, with very closely aligned visions and a strong security orientation seen in its central focus on transferring nuclear submarine technology to Australia quickly. Vietnam, or for that matter India, do not have much to offer AUKUS in its core objectives and the membership of any power that is not very closely aligned with the US is hard to imagine, as the tight internal cohesion has been visible in the willingness to even create major diplomatic issues with France, another closely aligned nation.<sup>198</sup>

This chapter aimed to fulfill two main functions: Firstly, it defined Vietnam's outlook and interests in the IPR by investigating the Security White Papers from 2009 and 2019. This showed Vietnam's interests to lie in upholding a peaceful status quo in the IPR in general and the SCS in particular. Its position shows an acute need to negotiate the tensions between economic dependence on Beijing the one side, and geopolitical reservations towards the violations of Vietnamese sovereignty claims on the other.

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<sup>197</sup> See (Panda J. , Making 'Quad Plus' a Reality, 2022).

<sup>198</sup> See (Schofield, 2021).

This balancing act is obvious in the relatively decisive stance that Hanoi takes towards Beijing in the SCS, and its simultaneous self-restriction in the Four No's policy aimed to reassure China. Referring back to the close reading of Indian interests, this points to a close convergence with India's interests, as the Indian position was also characterized by a similar need to strike the right balance.

Secondly, the chapter addressed the question whether Vietnam could utilize existing multilateral fora, most centrally the Quad, to see through its security interests. The lack of actionable unity in ASEAN on the one hand, and the strong homogeneity and cohesion of AUKUS mean that neither is suitable for coordinating action that strikes the right balance between not antagonizing China and still strengthening the status quo in the IPR according to Vietnamese needs. On closer inspection, a full membership in the Quad also turned out to be a path that would likely incur high costs in antagonizing China, with the prospective benefits of a Quad membership uncertain. Hence, while membership in the Quad might be an option for Vietnam if relations to Beijing worsen, it is currently unsuited as a forum for Vietnam. The upshot on the second main question of the chapter has hence been that none of the currently existing multilateral platforms strikes the balance that Vietnam is looking for.

Implicit in both of its main purposes, the chapter also provided some discussion of the strategic dilemma which Hanoi finds itself in towards Beijing, which comes from the need to stay true to its own national interests while not antagonizing China. Given China's economic might and its growing military power, this dilemma is almost universally felt among nations that oppose Beijing's revisionist goals in the Indo-Pacific. As illustrated in the previous chapter, this tension is clearly shared with India, making the two nations suitable partners for finding a balanced and shared approach

through their bilateral relations. While India is a member of the Quad, it is surely the least decisive in its action potential towards Chinese aggression. Put differently, it is the most “evasive” of the Quad members in its balancing effort vis-à-vis Beijing.<sup>199</sup> The following chapter will investigate how India and Vietnam have sought to cooperate on the basis of their shared interests. On the basis of an analysis of the current state of security cooperation, it will also outline areas of future potential as well as obstacles that the two partners will face in further deepening their security ties.

## **6. The Diplomatic and Material Progression of India-Vietnam Security Relations**

India and Vietnam already enjoyed good bilateral relationships at the time of the Cold War, when India still rejected close cooperation with most other Southeast Asian states on the grounds that it considered them to be too closely aligned with the US.<sup>200</sup> India was not only among the first countries to recognize the Vietnamese government after the unification of the country following the Vietnam War, but it also refrained from treating Vietnam as a diplomatic outcast during the Vietnam-Cambodian War. Conversely, the mutuality of the positive relationship has been long evident in Vietnam’s support for India’s deepened connections with ASEAN and Vietnam’s

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<sup>199</sup> S. 79 (Rajagopalan, 2020).

<sup>200</sup> See p. 13 (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009).

support for Indian ambitions to become a permanent member in the UN Security Council.<sup>201</sup>

While factors like these show the generally friendly bilateral relations between the two countries, the evolving trajectory of their bilateral security cooperation can also be traced by the establishment of increasingly deep formalized relations that facilitate this trend.

### **6.1 The Tiered Progression of the India-Vietnam Partnership**

The formalization of bilateral ties between the two countries took a big step forward through the Declaration of the Vietnam-India Strategic Partnership in 2007. As the partnership's classification as 'strategic' already suggests, the scope included matters of security and defense from the outset.<sup>202</sup> This has been underscored through the simultaneous instantiation of an annual defense policy dialogue on the ministerial level, which went through its 13<sup>th</sup> iteration in January 2021.<sup>203</sup> Relations further solidified through the signature of a Joint Vision Statement for the years 2015-2020, where the two countries agreed, among other goals, on further deepening their defense cooperation.<sup>204</sup>

The next step towards intensified cooperation was made in 2016, when the Prime Ministers of the two countries “agreed to elevate the current Strategic Partnership to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership“, thereby upgrading the relationship to the highest designation of bilateral relations that Vietnam is currently employing.<sup>205</sup> The joint statement issued at the occasion noted the “satisfaction over the strong and

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<sup>201</sup> See p. 4 (Pant, 2018).

<sup>202</sup> See p. 35 (Jha & Vinh, 2020).

<sup>203</sup> See (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021; Ministry of External Affairs, 2021).

<sup>204</sup> See (IDR News Network, 2015).

<sup>205</sup> (Ministry of External Affairs, 2016).

comprehensive development of the relations of long-standing traditional friendship and Strategic Partnership between the two countries so far“ and stressed the “firm foundation” of the relationship which is comprised of “close links in culture, history and civilization, mutual trust and understanding as well as the strong mutual support in international and regional fora“.<sup>206</sup> It is worth noting here that of the eight focus areas to be developed through the comprehensive strategic partnership, the one leading the list in first position of the joint statement is “1. Political relations, defence and security”, coming even before “2. Economic relations, trading and investment” and “3. Energy”, which signals the strong weight that this aspect of the relationship carries.<sup>207</sup>

Looking into the concrete details that the joint statement addresses under the heading “1. Political relations, defence and security”, we see an acknowledgement of the shared interests of the two countries with regard to a broad range of issues: “Both sides shared convergence of views on various bilateral and international issues, including the regional security situation in Asia.“<sup>208</sup> While phrased in very general and diplomatic terms, this statement is well compatible with the analysis of shared drivers behind the policies of India and Vietnam above, with both countries sharing worries over Chinese expansion and evolving big power competition in their region. Taking stock of “significant progress made in defence cooperation” the statement acknowledges “exchange of high-level visits, annual high-level dialogue, service-to-service cooperation, naval ship visits, extensive training and capacity building,

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

defence equipment procurement and related transfer of technology, and cooperation at regional fora such as ADMM-Plus” as markers of deepened cooperation.<sup>209</sup>

With the ‘India-Vietnam Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity and People’ signed by the prime ministers of the two countries in 2020, the cooperation’s future ambitions have been confirmed at the highest level.<sup>210</sup>

In the vision statement, the aligned interests of the two countries are apparent. They clearly state their understanding of their security partnership, writing that:

“it will be an important factor of stability in the Indo-Pacific region. To this the two sides will step up their military-to-military exchanges, training and capacity building programmes across the three services and coast guards and will intensify their defence industry collaboration building on India’s defence credit lines extended to Vietnam.”<sup>211</sup>

The employment of the Indo-Pacific as a regional framework should, for the reasons laid out above, be seen as containing a subtle message towards China, especially grouped together with the goal to strengthen the "stability" in the region. Used in this combination, it is clearly aimed at countering Chinese initiatives to change the status quo in the South China Sea or along the Sino-Indian border. This is further accentuated by the use of the terms “free, open, inclusive and rules-based“, all of which clearly bring the Joint Vision in close alignment with the American vision of regional affairs as expressed in the FOIP.

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> See (India-Vietnam Joint Vision , 2020).

<sup>211</sup> (India-Vietnam Joint Vision , 2020).



Doing justice to the comprehensive and strategic nature of the relationship, the Vision Statement goes beyond matters of defense and security to include the ambition to deepen the cultural and economic cooperation between the two countries, thus alluding to common interests in a broad spectrum of areas. While this might be considered only fitting for a comprehensive strategic partnership, such a broad focus raises the question whether the Vision Statement is primarily a demonstration of mutual diplomatic goodwill, that remains lacking in concrete steps to realize deeper defense cooperation. Put differently, what tangible steps towards defense cooperation that fall in line with the vision have been realized so far?

## **6.2 Going Beyond Words: MoUs, Lines of Credit and Sale of Military Equipment**

Extending broad declarations of good cooperative relationships, like the Joint Vision for Peace and Prosperity, are more specified arrangements on particular issues. In the field of defense, India and Vietnam have signed a number of relevant agreements and so-called Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), with a focus on defense and security. While MOUs are generally non-binding, they do signal a mature stage in finding common ground towards the realization of the related project and are very likely to be taken further to the implementation stage. For example, a grant of US\$ 5 million from India to be used as assistance for the development of an Army Software Park at the National Telecommunications University in Nha Trang was offered by PM Modi during the 2016 meeting of Prime Ministers. That was carried over into an agreement for implementation during the 2020 Prime Ministers' meeting that saw the issuance of the Joint Vision for Peace and the first tranche of US\$ 1 Million of said

grant was handed over in 2021, accompanied by the Indian ambassador to Hanoi's affirmation of "India's commitment to assist Vietnam in strengthening its IT and Defence capacities".<sup>212</sup>

More substantial yet are the Lines of Credit (LOCs) that India is providing to Vietnam for the purchase of defense equipment from India, which are adding up to US\$ 600 million.<sup>213</sup> Given that Vietnam's annual defense budget stood at approximately US\$ 5.8 billion in 2018, such a line of credit is poised to have a big impact on Hanoi's defense procurements and is aimed to boost "defence industrial cooperation focusing at defence modernization" and make this a major part of the defense partnership.<sup>214</sup>

The first US\$ 100 million of this LOC gives a good example of what shape such defense industrial cooperation between the two countries could take in the future. This tranche of the LOC is used for the construction of twelve High Speed Guard Boats that will be used by the Vietnam Border Guard Command.<sup>215</sup> The cooperative aspect of the arrangement is captured by the fact that the first five boats are built in India, while the remaining seven boats are built in Vietnam.<sup>216</sup> In recognition of the symbolic way in which this project embodies defense industry cooperation and Indian-led capacity building in Vietnam, the Indian ambassador to Hanoi described the project as an "icon of India-Vietnam Defence Partnership"<sup>217</sup>. A broader framework for defense industry cooperation of the two countries with the aim to

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<sup>212</sup> (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021)

<sup>213</sup> (Embassy of India to Hanoi, 2022)

<sup>214</sup> Relative to its total economy, Vietnam spent 2.36 percent of its GDP on its defense in 2018. See (Thuy, 2019) and p. 38 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019). "Defence Industrial Cooperation" is identified as the goal of the Indian LOCs in (Embassy of India to Hanoi, 2022).

<sup>215</sup> (Embassy of India to Hanoi, 2021)

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

facilitate further cooperation between the industries of the two countries is currently being worked out by the two countries' ministries of defense.<sup>218</sup>

Beyond such cooperation centered on the procurement and ultimately development of military equipment, there are deepening relations between the armed forces of the two countries, particularly in the maritime sphere. Frequent port calls as well as a bilateral maritime exercise involving the two Indian navy vessels INS Ranvijay and INS Kora and the Vietnamese frigate VPNS Ly Thai To held in August 2021 are proof of the effort to establish heightened interoperability between the two nations' navies.<sup>219</sup> A further aspect of this closeness in maritime security matters has been the training of Vietnamese submariners. As both the Indian and Vietnamese Navy are using the Russian-made Kilo-class of submarines, which India has had in operation since the mid 1980s, India has been in a good position to offer the necessary specialized training.<sup>220</sup> A similar logic applies in the case of the training required for flying Russian-made Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jets, where Vietnam has also asked for Indian assistance in training.<sup>221</sup> Further adding to the diverse engagements in the maritime sphere is close cooperation between the coast guards of the two nations, which are supported, among other means, by dedicated high-level meetings of coast guard officers as well as a dedicated dialogue on maritime security that has gone through its second iteration in 2021.<sup>222</sup>

While the initiatives laid out above clearly exhibit growing security ties between the two nations, we need to view this in the context of their other diplomatic engagements

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<sup>218</sup> See (Prime Minister's Office, 2020).

<sup>219</sup> See (Embassy of India to Hanoi, 2022).

<sup>220</sup> See (Ghosh P. K., 2014).

<sup>221</sup> See (Peri, 2016).

<sup>222</sup> See (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021) and (Embassy of India to Hanoi, 2022).

in the region in order to come to a well-adjusted verdict on the relative importance of India-Vietnam relations. For one, India's Look/Act East policies have brought with them a general deepening of relations with India's Southeast Asian neighborhood. Taking as an example the development of the ASEAN-Indian partnership, India moved from a sectoral dialogue partner to a full dialogue partner of ASEAN in 1995. India-ASEAN ties were subsequently elevated to a Summit Level Partnership in 2002 and later evolved into a strategic partnership in 2012.<sup>223</sup> However, while India-ASEAN relations have deepened and relevant documents like the "Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-India Partnership for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2021-2025)" do make reference to security issues, the defense cooperation facilitated by this framework remains on a shallow level so far.<sup>224</sup>

On the bilateral level, India has also successively upgraded its engagements with other stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region. This includes the upgrade of India-Japan relations from a strategic and global partnership to a special strategic and global partnership in 2014, as well as deepening its relations with Malaysia from a strategic partnership to an enhanced strategic partnership in 2015, as well as the establishment of a strategic partnership with Singapore in the same year.<sup>225</sup> Noteworthy is also that LOCs offered by India, also such specifically targeted at defense, are not an exclusive privilege of Vietnam. An LOC of US\$ 100 million has been offered to Mauritius and an LOC of US\$ 500 million to Bangladesh, both with a clear focus on defense.<sup>226</sup>

Looking at the broader picture of Vietnam's international politics, it also shows that India is not the only state with which Hanoi is seeking closer cooperation. In fact, in

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<sup>223</sup> See p. 562 (Gurunathan & Moorthy, 2021).

<sup>224</sup> See (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020).

<sup>225</sup> P. 40 (Jha & Vinh, 2020).

<sup>226</sup> See (Times of India, 2021) and (Economic Times of India, 2021).

terms of formalized relations, the two other nations with which Vietnam is engaging on the level of comprehensive strategic partnership are Russia and China.<sup>227</sup> As the deep ties with Russia feature a substantial defense component founded on Moscow's role as the provider of most of Vietnam's military equipment, this might offer resistance to deepening India-Vietnam cooperation in the security sector. With 78 per cent of Vietnamese arms purchases during the 2014-2018 time period coming from Russia, there is likely to be some pushback if Moscow's privileged role as a supplier should be undermined by Indian initiatives.<sup>228</sup> But while the Russian interests in Vietnam are more limited, the fact that China is also designated as a comprehensive strategic partner points to a much bigger challenge for deepening India-Vietnam relations and makes clear that the true value of India-Vietnam security relations cannot be assessed simply by the name given to their tier of cooperation alone. Instead, those realized tangible defense related projects should be taken as a measure of their evolving relation going forward.

### 6.3 Challenges for Further Deepening Security Cooperation

While shared interests, particularly with regards to China's rise in general and the South China Sea in particular, form a solid foundation for the growing cooperation between India and Vietnam, there are also factors that act as obstacles for their evolving partnership.

Firstly, it is important to note the fact that the security partnership between the two nations is still far removed from a fully formalized military alliance. And this is

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<sup>227</sup> See p. 2 (Vinh, *India-Vietnam Relations under Modi 2.0: Prospects and Challenges*, 2019)

<sup>228</sup> See p. 6 (Vinh, *India-Vietnam Relations under Modi 2.0: Prospects and Challenges*, 2019).

However, it is still unclear how the recent war in Ukraine will affect Russia's ability to continue functioning in its role as a major arms provider around the world. The economic sanctions as well as the significant losses in equipment might hinder function going forward.

highly unlikely to change anytime soon, as treaty-based alliance, with a guarantee of mutual defense is very hard to conciliate with India's long-standing commitment to national autonomy and likewise for the case of Vietnam.<sup>229</sup> On the level of defense doctrine, India's historical role as a leading power in the NAM has long predisposed it to avoiding the formation of deeper security ties with other nations. Even though it has clearly shifted to a more active stance with the adoption of the AEP and membership in the Quad, deep-seated reservations do remain.<sup>230</sup> Analysis above has shown that such reservations are not purely ideological, but also align the need to balance China evasively.

Vietnam is on a similar footing, having only started in recent decades to significantly step up its international partnerships after a long period of very restricted diplomacy owing to its communist system and relative Cold War isolation.<sup>231</sup> As has been argued above, the need for evasive balancing is even more pronounced in Vietnam, leading to its inscription in the so-called 'Four No's' Policy.

While the two countries' congruent need for a carefully balanced approach towards China has been considered a major driver behind their increased cooperation, there might be a level of depth of bilateral cooperation beyond which these shared concerns will turn into a limitation.

As formal alliances and joining forces "against another" nation are ruled out by this policy, Vietnam is unlikely to extend cooperation with New Delhi beyond a certain point.<sup>232</sup> However, this is not to say that the bilateral between the two nations has

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<sup>229</sup> See p. 24 f. (Jaishankar, 2019).

<sup>230</sup> P.759 f. (Pant & Super, India's 'non-alignment' conundrum: a twentieth-century policy in a changing world, 2015)

<sup>231</sup> See p. 321 (Tinh, 2021).

<sup>232</sup> P. 23 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2019).

already evolved to where it is running up against a hard stop. In fact, while the policy precludes the setting up of foreign military bases, Vietnam has been encouraging interested naval powers to conduct port calls in its Cam Ranh International Port and has received military vessels from China, India, the US, France and elsewhere.<sup>233</sup> It has furthermore allowed Indian navy vessels special access to its port at Nha Trang, underscoring the exceptional role of India as a partner in the maritime dimension.<sup>234</sup> Additionally, as the big power competition in the Indo-Pacific intensifies, there is likely to be a shift in the level of bilateral commitment that India and Vietnam are willing to make. Since the cautious approaches to deep diplomatic commitments that are evident in Vietnam's Four No's, as well as in the remnants of Indian non-alignment, reflect a certain assessment of what is the best strategy to serve the national interests of the two countries at a certain point in time. However, while avoiding deep commitments to others may have been an adaptive strategy in the past, this is changing due to mounting big power competition in the region. As tensions rise, the value to be found in forming deeper security ties with like-minded partners will increase, potentially necessitating the need to redraw long-established limiters to deepened cooperation. And as the case of continued joint exploration activity in the SCS in the face of Chinese bullying suggests, the two are already willing to tolerate significant pushback as the price for their cooperation.

Another challenge that has been identified for deepening relations between the two is reminiscent of the considerations around a potential Vietnamese role in the Quad and pertains to Vietnam's single party system and the incongruity with the Indian

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<sup>233</sup> See (Chandrashekhara, 2018).

<sup>234</sup> See (Ghoshal, 2013).

democratic way of government.<sup>235</sup> However, this can be discarded for much the same reasons that its domestic system would likely not be a substantial obstacle for Vietnam in becoming a Quad member. Firstly, India is itself showing a clear trend away from a fully open society.<sup>236</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, such matters of domestic politics do not touch on the core foundation of the partnership, which lies in shared interests in external affairs.

A good source in identifying further potential hindrances for the bilateral is the yearly “The State of Southeast Asia”-Survey conducted by ISEAS in Singapore. Representing the opinions of a broad scope of policymakers, academics, researchers and others, this survey’s utility for the present question lies in the inclusion of a section on the perceptions of trust towards the biggest regional powers, among them India.<sup>237</sup> The concrete question used was phrased as: “How confident are you that India will “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance?”<sup>238</sup> After the preceding chapters on the positive trajectory of the India-Vietnam bilateral, it comes as no surprise to see trust of India come out very high in Vietnam, with sentiment towards India being yet more positive only in the Philippines. However, with Vietnamese trust for India high relative to its ASEAN cohort, it remains far from absolute, as only 29.9% of respondents professed trust in India (higher only in the Philippines at 35.3%).<sup>239</sup> Those participants that identified as distrustful of India on the first question were then asked in a follow-up question why

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<sup>235</sup> See p. 70 (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021) for the point that their different political systems might become an obstacle for India-Vietnam relations.

<sup>236</sup> See (Kugelman, 2021) and (Vaishnav, 2021).

<sup>237</sup> See p. 46 (Seah, et al., 2022).

<sup>238</sup> P. 46 (Seah, et al., 2022)

<sup>239</sup> P. 45 (Seah, et al., 2022).



the distrusted India.<sup>240</sup> Among five possible answers, Vietnamese respondents distrustful of India overwhelmingly chose two answers, representing an accumulated 89.8% of responses. These two answers were: “India does not have the capacity or political will for global leadership” (51.1%) and “I am concerned that India is distracted with its internal and sub-continental affairs and thus cannot focus on global concerns and issues” (37,8%).<sup>241</sup>

These two answers, while being quite broad and the result of an anonymously conducted survey, point to two much more formidable challenges for keeping the India-Vietnam bilateral on its positive trajectory in the future. This is because if India is seen as either lacking in power potential or its commitment to bring a broad regional focus to its policies, then this will significantly detract from its attractiveness as a partner for Vietnam as well as for other potential partners. It is worth pointing out that the thesis has already touched on many initiatives that India is engaging in that are poised to have a positive impact on these two weaknesses of New Delhi’s position, like its broader engagement in regional affairs through the Quad and the AEP, as well as its efforts to strengthen its armed forces as part of its internal balancing of China. However, as the survey represents very recent data collected well after the introduction of these initiatives by India, their positive impact on the external perception of India appears to remain limited to date.

Compared to the more formal issues around lingering conservatism in the two nations defense policies or potential problems stemming from incongruencies in their political systems, this section has identified the most serious concern for the continued deepening of India-Vietnam security cooperation to lie in a lack of trust, particularly

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> P. 47 (Seah, et al., 2022).

in terms of India's power potential and the focus of its commitment. Comparing the negative assessment of Indian military capabilities implicit in this result to the respective data for Japan, where capacity appears to be much less of a concern, suggests that India could do better in communicating its strength to potential partners in the region.<sup>242</sup> Furthermore, it needs to address the perception of being too absorbed in the politics of its subcontinent in order to underscore its willingness to play a bigger regional role. As these two pathways to addressing India's relative weakness in the dimension of trust can be pursued at relatively little cost to India, there is little reason to assume that it cannot turn this around within a reasonable timeframe and continue to build on the strong foundations of trust that connects India and Vietnam through their positive historical and present engagements.

#### **6.4 The Impact of India-Vietnam Relations on Balance of Power in ASEAN's Region**

This thesis has embraced the theoretical framework of structural realism to come to a clearer understanding of how the intensifying competition between the big powers of the IPR – the PRC and the US plus its allies – has created conditions in which India and Vietnam find each other converging on a very similar outlook. Their status of quickly developing nations interested in their national security and maintaining conditions conducive for further socio-economic development have led them to show a clear tendency towards the US-led pushback against revisionist Chinese efforts to disrupt regional status quo. Coming away from this investigation, it is now interesting to reverse the direction of thought and attend to two further questions, namely: What is the potential of these two countries' relationship for paving the way for broader

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<sup>242</sup> See p. 49 (Seah, et al., 2022).

ASEAN-India security cooperation? And, relatedly, what is the present and potential future impact of India on the balance of power in ASEAN's region and the IPR more broadly?

In answering these two questions, particularly the second one, it is important to point out the limitations of balance-of-power-thinking. As Waltz concedes, analysis in terms of balance of power does not yield precise forecasts, but rather predicts that the nations in the international system will experience pressure towards “a loosely defined and inconstant condition of balance”.<sup>243</sup> Hence, balance of power remains a somewhat vague, metaphorical way of capturing the drivers that nations experience in the anarchic international system. This “indeterminate” nature of structural realism made it important to not only investigate drivers and interests, but to also go into the details of what types of cooperation have actually been realized on the ground between India and Vietnam.<sup>244</sup> This is not to say that the theory is without value for generating insights, but just to tame the expectations regarding the level of detail of any predictions made based on considering the balance of power and its future development.

With this in mind, let us now consider the first of these two questions, concerning the role of India-Vietnam relations in stimulating deeper ASEAN-India cooperation. As the analysis on India's engagement with ASEAN and its AOIP has shown, the limiting factor for more effective security cooperation between these two parties lies in ASEAN's difficulty to come to a strong consensual position, especially on issues pertaining to the PRC and the SCS.<sup>245</sup> As its engagement in the Quad shows, India is

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<sup>243</sup> P. 124 (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979).

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>245</sup> See (De Castro, *ASEAN in Search of a Common Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, 2021).

ready to push a much stronger line against Beijing, while ASEAN is still struggling with internal cohesion. The fact that ASEAN's focus still lies on engaging China on lengthy negotiations on a Code of Conduct with dubious efficacy instead of searching out pathways of effectively balancing against Beijing's expansionism shows how far behind the current state of Chinese unilateral actions in the SCS it is lagging.<sup>246</sup>

And if ASEAN was in fact a single actor with clear interest in self-help and survival, such a blatant lack of effective balancing efforts would be very difficult to reconcile with a balance of power approach. However, as ASEAN is a highly diverse and relatively loose association of actors with widely diverging interests, this is not very surprising.<sup>247</sup> Indeed, some of its members, like Cambodia, seem to be actively engaging in bandwagoning with the PRC, thus choosing the opposite of balancing against China.<sup>248</sup> What this shows is that a loose multilateral organization does not follow the predictions of balance-of-power reasoning because it simply does not fulfill the structural assumptions that underlie the theory. The association does not behave as a single actor with survival as its highest goal. Instead, given its consensual decision principle, it is bound to represent the lowest common denominator among the member nations' national interests. Vietnam, therefore, has little room for functioning as a bridge between India and ASEAN. This is because its example and experiences in reaching a meaningful level of balancing engagement with India does not find its way into ASEAN consensus. Instead, this consensus remains hostage to the least interested parties. Put concisely, given the stark difference between Indian

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<sup>246</sup> See p. 289 ff. (De Castro, *Under the Shadow of the Giants: The ASEAN in Search of a Common Strategy in a Fluid and Perilous Indo-Pacific Region*, 2022)

<sup>247</sup> Think back to David Shambaugh's graphical representation showing the continuum of individual ASEAN nation's relations with the US and the PRC respectively for a visual illustration of this point. See p. 243 (Shambaugh, 2020).

<sup>248</sup> See p. 444 (Po & Primiano, 2020).

and, say, Cambodian security goals in the IPR, there is little hope for the India-Vietnam cooperation to lead to a deepened engagement on the level of India-ASEAN security relations.

This conclusion has implications for all ASEAN nations that feel the need to engage in effective balancing of Chinese aggression, as it shows that ASEAN in its current state is an ineffective venue for organizing security cooperation. This inability is likely to make itself felt even more strongly as big-power competition in the region keeps heating up, and as polarity on security issues within ASEAN will increase apace.

As some members will want to follow the increased pressure to effectively balance China, they are likely to search for other multilateral forums to facilitate external balancing while also increasing their efforts at the kind of bilateral security cooperation we see between India and Vietnam. Therefore, Vietnam-India cooperation is not likely to inspire broader India-ASEAN security cooperation, barring substantial changes in ASEAN's internal decision mechanisms. Conversely, it makes more sense to see in Vietnam's bilateral engagement with India a sign of ASEAN's failure to establish an effective multilateral venue for balancing against China's rise. Vietnam's relatively assertive stance vis-à-vis China then explains why its bilateral efforts have already evolved further than those of most of its fellow ASEAN members. Structural realism predicts that we will see those other ASEAN members that are most concerned about China's rise to also expand their bilateral balancing efforts following the model of India and Vietnam.

The upshot of the previous question was that India is very unlikely to work through ASEAN in its effort to balance against the PRC. But this still leaves open the second question: What is the present and future impact of India on the balance of power in ASEAN's region and the broader IPR? In answering this question, it is helpful to briefly bring back to mind the current state of big-power competition in the IPR: China is increasingly challenging the American-led order in the broader PRC and most assertively in the SCS as it is determined to convert its economic clout into geopolitical gains. This is happening at a time that American preeminence is slowly fading, with the "unipolar moment" having given way to a more contested world order.<sup>249</sup> Chinese gains of relative power are most pronounced in its neighborhood, which explains why the SCS and Taiwan are the locations where the PRC is acting most assertively. The US is clearly ramping up the diverse channels at its disposal in balancing against this shift. This encompasses internal balancing by materially and strategically updating its armed forces and crucially extends to external balancing through its allies, partners and multilateral efforts in the IPR.<sup>250</sup>

With this bigger picture in mind, we can now distinguish two ways in which India is playing a role in the regional balance of power. Firstly, India is clearly contributing to US-led multilateral balancing through its membership in the Quad. Even though it has been criticized for not being perfectly aligned with its fellow Quad members on some issues, it still contributes significant weight and credibility to the Quad. As a nuclear armed state with the 4<sup>th</sup> highest military capability in the region, its membership is of substantial importance to sending a signal to China, even if the Quad is far from a

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<sup>249</sup> P. 1 (O'Rourke, 2021).

<sup>250</sup> See (Department of Defense, 2020) for insight into the high level of awareness within the US government around the challenge that the PRC is posing to the US position and for some of the measures that are being weighed.

formal alliance.<sup>251</sup> So, while India is not the US's most important or most trusted partner in the region, it brings significant weight to bear on the US-side of the big-power rivalry. This is true even more so as it is geographically closer to the center of the IPR, compared to many of the US's closest partners, like Japan, Australia or the UK. India hence fulfils the important role of adding a regional developing nation to the supporters of the US position, thereby not only bringing its material power but also credibility to the balancing effort.

A second and more interesting role India might play in the balance of power emerges if we slightly rephrase the question and ask instead: Can India show a way to relate to the contested balance of power in the IPR without adding to the bipolarity? Put differently, does India, for example in its bilateral security cooperation with Vietnam, show that it is possible to balance against China outside of joining the US-led side? This question is of course of particular interest for all those regional states, especially in ASEAN, that see the need to balance against China but shy away from siding with the US for fear of antagonizing Beijing. It is a question that draws its relevance from the double-bind that so many nations experience vis-à-vis China. This double-bind is characterized by national interests that are opposed to China's revisionist goals in the IPR, combined with economic (and security) exposure that makes unfriendly relations with Beijing potentially very costly.

The strong development of India-Vietnam bilateral security cooperation at the heart of this thesis shows that there is some potential here. Unlike India's role in the Quad, where it weighs in on the US-side of the big-power bipolarity, the bilateral partnership with Vietnam is happening transversally to US-China competition insofar as it is

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<sup>251</sup> See (Lowy Institute, 2021 a) for assessment of India's military capability relative to other regional powers.

specifically tailored to the interests of these two nations. This is true because a good amount of the benefits of this bilateral cooperation takes the form of internal balancing, even though they involve the interaction with an external partner. For example, by making a reciprocally attractive deal on the provision of high-speed patrol boats to be provided to Vietnam by India, both of them emerge stronger, irrespective of whether they intend to balance against China or the US. The same holds for other aspects of their cooperation: If the two should partner up on deeper defense industry cooperation in the future, such a project would make both nations more independent from external weapons suppliers and hence help insulate them against aggression, irrespective of its source. This logic also extends to those aspects of their bilateral that constitute external balancing, such as their joint military drills with their goal of improving interoperability. As this is done not in the service of either of the two big powers, but rather to serve the needs of these two nations, it does not contribute to further polarization and instead increases their leeway for action independent of China or the US.

In essence, what the India-Vietnam cooperation shows is that bipolar arrangements can help smaller nations to find increased independence in their own strength. There are of course limits to how far such bilateral approaches can go in insulating relatively smaller powers against big power competition. But there is nothing that prevents such bilateral initiative evolving into yet more impactful minilateral arrangements that follow the model of the Quad or AUKUS, but that remain attuned to the needs of smaller regional states. Important lessons for how to design such minilaterals can be learnt from ASEAN's struggles to to fulfill a meaningful role in the security



dimension of the IPR. For instance, in order to be resilient under big-power pressure, their membership needs to be based on aligned interests, not on mere geography.

After the previous chapter focused on the concrete shape of the India-Vietnam bilateral, this chapter took a step back and considered the broader impact of India and this cooperation on the balance of power in the region. It found that the evolving India-Vietnam bilateral can be a model for other nations to emulate, with and without Indian involvement. The unique benefit of such cooperation is the ability to strengthen nations' independence by strengthening their capabilities, all the while staying away from increasing regional polarization. Such an approach that centers on building national capabilities away from big power competition will not appeal to all nations in ASEAN or the IPR. For example, it is very much at odds with the way that Cambodia appears to have chosen as its path, namely the attempt to deal with big power competition by bandwagoning with one of the big-power poles. But such a more self-reliant approach that takes strong bilateral cooperation as an important component of navigating big power competition will be attractive for those nations that find themselves concerned over China's actions and are yet unwilling or unable to join in US-led multilateral forums. India has demonstrated its willingness to be a partner in such bilateral cooperation, serving its own interest in balancing China evasively through partnership with regional states. While the thesis has shown that the productive partnership with Vietnam is supported by friendly historical relations, the core of its current progress lies in the confluence of interests vis-à-vis maintaining stable regional relations amidst big-power competition. As many other regional nations find themselves with similarly converging concerns such bilateral security cooperation is a promising way forward for regional stability

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis has investigated India-Vietnam bilateral security cooperation, pursuing three core research objectives by mostly relying on the framework of structural realism and the related concept of balance of power.

The first and most central concern was to better comprehend this bilateral partnership by examining the impetus behind it and the concrete shape that it has taken. In order to do this, the thesis first explored how China and the US compete over shifting the regional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. This showed that China is pursuing expansive territorial gains in the strategically important South China Sea through unilateral actions, while the US is pushing back against such a shift by balancing externally through coming together with its partners and allies in multilateral forums, most importantly the Quad and AUKUS. The PRC's pursuit of its territorial claims has directly affected India and Vietnam in their joint oil and gas exploration projects in Vietnamese coastal waters and other core interests, explaining their tendency towards supporting the US-led position through India's membership in the Quad and Vietnam joining the Quad Plus arrangement. Against this background of China-US competition, the thesis then narrowed down on India and Vietnam, by closely examining their national interests and the way in which they have been able to interact with the region's main multilateral forums in pursuit of these. Tracing the Indian position from its time as one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned-Movement to its present role in the Quad and its interaction with ASEAN presented the insight that India, while broadly supportive of US-led balancing of China, continues to seek

out a softer, more evasive way of balancing against China than its Western partners because of its greater exposure to punitive Chinese reactions. In the case of Vietnam, there is a similar tension between confidently pushing back against an overbearing PRC and the need to reassure China of Vietnam's friendly intentions. Because of this split, none of the available multilateral forums was identified as suitable for furthering Vietnam's specific goals, as ASEAN turned out to be lacking in decisiveness, whilst membership in the Quad would likely lead to significant aggravation of Sino-Vietnamese relations. In effect then, the investigation of the two countries' positions showed that India and Vietnam converge in the need to balance against China without becoming caught in the bipolarity by fully falling in behind the US and its allies. This also implies that none of the existing multilateral forums is fully suitable to facilitate the balanced approach to the China-US competition that they are seeking. Having thus gained insight into the driving forces that underlie the mutual interest in deepened cooperation, a detailed investigation of the progressively deeper security partnership between India and Vietnam followed, taking into account the diplomatic as well as the material dimension. This showed that the bilateral is developing strongly, reaching the highest tier of bilateral partnerships accorded by Vietnam in 2016 and continuing to work towards deeper and more meaningful cooperation on the ground. The section closed by addressing the obstacles that the partnership will have to overcome to continue on its positive trajectory, such as adjustments in defense doctrine and strengthening of trust.

In a final step, the thesis then turned to consider its two closely related questions concerning the potential of the India-Vietnam bilateral to pave the way for broader ASEAN-India cooperation and India's impact on the balance of power in ASEAN and

the IPR. The upshot here was twofold: Firstly, India is increasingly weighing in on the side of the US and its allies through its membership in the Quad and support of the FOIP. Secondly, and more interestingly from the point of view of smaller regional states, it is also seeking ways to supplement its balancing against the PRC outside of US-led forums. Meaningful India-ASEAN cooperation in the sphere of security remains unlikely unless there are internal reforms to the association that allow it to become more decisive in this sphere. However, the above research points to the strong potential of the India-Vietnam bilateral to function as an example for the utility of strengthened bilateralism based on shared interests, especially the interest to avoid being caught in big-power competition. As such interests are shared by all those ASEAN and IPR nations that fear Chinese economic retaliation should they be seen to align too closely with the US, India stands out as a potential partner for them. Beyond this role of India being itself an attractive partner for such cooperation, successful India-Vietnam security cooperation also stands to have an impact by the power of example, inspiring security partnerships that contain neither Vietnam or India. Attention also needs to be paid to the potential of productive bilateralism evolving into new regional multilateral forums in the future.

This thesis began with the observation that the “ASEAN Miracle” has come under significant pressure from the divisive effects of big power competition. As one of the findings of the thesis suggests, ASEAN itself is not in a good position to lead a collective response to the dynamics of US-China bipolarity, even though its effects are detrimental to the sustained peace and development that are both at the heart of the association’s goals and the interests of its individual member countries. As

ASEAN is thus in danger of failing its claim to regional centrality, it is for agile and cohesive bilateral partnerships of the kind of India-Vietnam cooperation to uphold a favorable balance of power and work towards establishing a truly regional response to the threat of Southeast Asia once again falling prey to instrumentalization in big-power gambles. The initiative of India and Vietnam in jointly pursuing their converging interests exemplifies an important component in the effort of making Southeast Asia more resilient as tensions continue to rise. To be sure, the smaller powers in ASEAN and the IPR cannot avoid positioning themselves towards the big powers' agendas through such bilateral cooperation. But what the example of Indian and Vietnamese support for the broad tenets of the US-led position shows is that such an alignment can come in degrees and will afford more options to those that independently strengthen their capabilities bilaterally. With ASEAN seemingly stuck in its ways, saving the Southeast Asian miracle of peace and development now depends more on the initiatives of individual nations to come together on the grounds of shared interests. India and Vietnam must be seen as a clear example of this.

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