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Uneasy embrace: Vietnam's responses to the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy amid U.S.–China rivalry

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ABSTRACT

Like many other small and middle powers, Vietnam is facing a strategic dilemma in the face of the U.S.–China rivalry. With the introduction of a vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the US seeks to strengthen ties with its allies and partners in the region to preserve rules-based international order and to counter China's rise. Being positioned as the U.S. burgeoning like-minded partner in the regional security architecture, how Vietnam responds to the FOIP strategy, hence, merits consideration. This article argues that Vietnam has responded positively toward the FOIP strategy due to the high compatibility between some key tenets of this strategy and its national interests. However, rather than joining and supporting FOIP in a full-fledged way, Vietnam has chosen to work selectively in some issues with the US. More specifically, while Vietnam proactively embraces the economic dimension in FOIP, it still remains cautious about the security domain. The rationale behind Vietnam's hesitation to lend full support to this strategy is partially driven by China factor. In this article, China is addressed as a "brake," which can exert influence on the speed and scope of cooperation that Vietnam is willing to move forward with the US under FOIP strategy.

KEYWORDS Brake; China factor; Indo-Pacific strategy; U.S.–China rivalry; Vietnam

Introduction

In August 2016, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first outlined Japan's vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development. Later, in November 2017, the United States (U.S.) President Donald Trump took the FOIP concept and referred to it in his remarks at an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Da Nang, Vietnam. Since then, the concept has gradually gained currency

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in the U.S. strategic discourse, and became the Trump administration's key Asia policy. The emergence of the term "Indo-Pacific" represents a crucial shift in the U.S. strategic thinking, i.e., from the previous Asia-Pacific narrative to the current Indo-Pacific one, in which a rising power – India is included. The rationale behind this transformation is driven by both geo-economic and geopolitical considerations. But, the importance of the latter seems to outweigh the former given the current U.S.-China geostrategic competition and the widespread fears from China's rise. As Scott (2018) noted, a key feature of the U.S. FOIP strategy is to take advantage of India, a rising power to constrain another rising power – China.

It is worth noting that, many principles enshrined in the FOIP strategy, such as: free, fair, and reciprocal trade, open investment, good governance, and freedom of navigation and overflight, etc. are closely associated with the established liberal and rules-based international order that has long existed since the end of the World War II. At the same time, some principles seem to target China, for example: U.S. call for open investment reminds one of China-funded infrastructure projects under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while freedom of navigation and overflight is indicative of China's growing assertiveness in the East China Sea (ECS) and South China Sea (SCS).

In comparison with the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy, the anti-China rhetoric in FOIP is much more pronounced. Relevant reports on FOIP strategy released by different U.S. departments have repeatedly warned regional nations about China's ambition of replacing the current liberal and rules-based international order with its repressive one (U.S. DoD, 2019; U.S. DoS, 2019); at the same time, called on closer cooperation and engagement between the US, its allies and partners to preserve this order, and to secure their collective interests. The revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between the US, Japan, India, and Australia in 2017, acts as a strategic maneuver for Washington to implement FOIP strategy. In addition, the US is also seeking to develop relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), among which Vietnam is regarded as America's important like-minded partner. For Vietnam, the launch of FOIP strategy has brought about remarkable changes to its foreign policy environment and regional security architecture. That said, due to more pronounced anti-China rhetoric of FOIP strategy, Vietnam is facing a strategic dilemma regarding how to respond reasonably to both the U.S. FOIP strategy and China's rise.

In this context, this paper aims to examine how Vietnam has responded to the U.S. FOIP strategy, and how China factor has affected and shaped Vietnam's responses and actions. This study argues that given almost all components of the FOIP strategy are compatible with the country's national

interests, particularly the rules-based international order embedded in FOIP, Vietnam has shown a rather favourable attitude toward this strategy. Evidence can be found from Vietnam's little reluctance to adopt the term "Indo-Pacific" in its diplomatic discourses or official reports. Plus, in meetings with the U.S. diplomats, Vietnamese officials asserted that Vietnam and other ASEAN countries would continue supporting and coordinating with the US in maintaining peace, security, stability, cooperation, and rules-based order in the region and the world (Tran, 2020). However, Vietnam's participation in the FOIP has so far primarily focused on economic dimension. For the security dimension, Hanoi avoids siding entirely with the US. Rather, it only seeks cooperation in some selective issues which fit well with its national interests, for example: enhancing maritime capacity in the SCS. The rationale behind Vietnam's seemingly ambivalent attitude towards this strategy can be partially attributed to China factor. Specifically, Beijing acts as both a "push" and a "pull," influencing Hanoi's willingness to move forward with Washington under the FOIP framework.

The rest of this paper is structured in three parts. First, I summarise some current debates on the foreign policies and strategies adopted by small and middle powers when they are caught between great powers. In the second section, I first briefly introduce the concept and components of the FOIP strategy, as well as the role that Vietnam plays in it. From this foundation, I collect Vietnam's official statements, Vietnamese experts' perspectives on FOIP to analyse and clearly define Vietnam's stance towards this strategy. Lastly, this paper attempts to provide some possible explanations for Vietnam's ambivalent responses to the FOIP strategy.

Foreign policies of middle powers amid U.S.-China rivalry

China's rise and growing U.S.-China rivalry

The geostrategic competition between the US and China has become conspicuous these years in almost every realm, including: politics, economy, security, etc. Although it is unlikely that an all-out war will break out between the US and China, many still concerned about some possible small conflicts or proxy wars outside the territories of these two giants in the future. Goldstein (2013) argued that U.S.-China rivalry can easily escalate into open military conflict when both tend to resort to using force to protect their vital interests. The possibility of conflict is especially higher as the red lines of vital interests between the US and China are vague, which are not so clearly defined as those in the former U.S.-Soviet relations (Goldstein, 2013, pp. 58–59).

The extant literature suggests several causes behind the current U.S.-China rivalry. The first cause is associated with change in the balance of

power between the US and China. Even though there are still huge discrepancies amongst scholars in terms of America's declinism and whether or not China will surpass the US in the near future, it is undeniable that the relative capability between the US and China is being narrowed (Liff & Ikenberry, 2014). In a "power spectrum" sketched by Brooks and Wohlforth, China is categorised as an "emerging potential superpower," which is solely placed under the superpower (the US), but is ranked above any other great powers. China has possessed enough economic capacity to be able to bid for the superpower status but still has not had sufficient technological capacity to do so (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, p. 43). The power transition theory even believes that as China's national power enables it to overtake the US, the risk of a major war will likely to happen (Rauch, 2017).

The dramatic increase in material capabilities has allowed Beijing to strengthen its military. According to a report released by Rand Corporation in 2020, China can leverage its economic power to weaken U.S. military influence (Rand, 2020). Admittedly, China's military capacities make the US find it much harder to deploy all military options as it used to do in the 1990s. That means the US must factor in possible counter-reactions of China. Besides, America's ability to pursue its own interests in the world affairs is being incredibly constrained by Chinese rising power. Simply speaking, the US now has to compete with China in SCS, Africa, Latin America, etc. where the interests of two countries converge (Shifrinson & Beckley, 2013).

In addition, China also attempts to use its economic power to exert influence over other countries and pursue coercive foreign policy. Over the last 20 years, China has become the first or second largest trade partner of almost all Asian countries. Heavy trade dependence on China causes regional states to have little choice but to accommodate with some of China's political and economic interests, such as: Taiwan and Tibet issues, China's status as a market economy (Kastner, 2016). With the introduction of BRI, China has more frequently manipulated both incentive and coercive economic tools to alter other states' behaviours, such as controlling exports and imports, discouraging Chinese tourists to particular countries, disfavoured foreign companies in its soil (Jung, Lee, & Lee, 2021, p. 3).

The second cause behind the U.S.-China strategic competition is originated from an ideological clash between two different world visions, and/or between democracy and authoritarianism. Since Xi Jinping took office in 2013, Chinese foreign policy has shifted from Deng Xiaoping's "hide and bide the time" (*taoguang yanghui*) strategy to "striving for achievement" (*fenfa youwei*) approach, with a focus on fostering greater regional integration and dependence on China, and turning China's neighboring areas into a "community of common destiny" (*mingyun gongtongti*). Within this new

framework, China has come up with several initiatives and deployed its economic statecraft to obtain a variety of strategic goals. On international stages, China seeks to boost its confident agenda by highlighting the alter-nativeness of “China Model,” which might indirectly challenge “Washington Consensus” (Stromseth, 2019). As such, in its official reports, Washington has attempted to draw a clear distinction between “free” and “repressive” visions of world order in the Indo-Pacific region (The Trump White House, 2017; U.S. DoD, 2018).

Given the change in balance of power as well as deepening ideological differences, the US has hardened its stance toward China in recent years. During the Trump administration, taking a stronger stance towards China has gradually gained bipartisan support (Shambaugh, 2018). The 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) and the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) both regarded China as the U.S. strategic competitor, who seeks to replace the US in the Indo-Pacific region (The Trump White House, 2017, p. 25; U.S. DoD, 2018, pp. 1–2). The report *United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China* released by the White House in May 2020, even indicated the failure of the “old paradigm of blind engagement with China,” and appealed to the US to adopt a competitive strategy (The Trump White House, 2020). Shortly afterwards, the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared in a speech on July 23, 2020 that 50 years of engagement with China had failed; thus, he called for an end to this “blind engagement.” (Pompeo, 2020b).

To this end, the US has adopted a variety of measures targeting China. In late 2017, the Trump administration introduced a vision for Free and Open Indo-Pacific, which replaced the previous Asia-Pacific strategy and became a key term for official U.S. discourse. In the wake of 2018, President Trump launched a trade war towards China by imposing higher tariffs on imported Chinese goods in an attempt to force China to remedy its unfair trade practices, including: forced technology transfer, limited market access, intellectual property theft, and subsidies to state-owned enterprises. Against this backdrop, the current U.S.-China relations seem to have passed the point of no return.

The erosion of hedging ability of middle powers

The US-China rivalry has produced mixed impacts on the US and China in particular and other in-between countries in general. Washington assumes that China’s rise could be threatening to its hub-and-spoke maritime system while Beijing regards the strengthening of security ties between Washington and its allies is designed to contain China. As a result, the confrontation between these two giants has gradually created a geopolitical

fault line cut across East Asian region (Wu, 2017, pp. 202–204). On this fault line, both the US and China are finding ways to either pressure or induce the regional states to their side or to participate in their initiatives. With the advent of FOIP strategy, Washington attempts to form a US-led balancing coalition in the region to counter Beijing's rise. The idea of an "Asian NATO," which includes four Quad countries and several of China's neighbours, is growing in popularity (Quinn, 2020).

Insights from the conventional international theory suggest that under the asymmetric structure, the strategies toward major powers that are most frequently adopted by small and middle powers are either balancing or bandwagoning (Kang, 2009). As the capability of a lesser state gets stronger, it will be more likely to adopt balancing strategy, and vice versa. However, along with the rise of China, a majority of regional states have not adopted either "pure balancing" or "pure bandwagoning" as balance-of-power logic predicted. Instead, small states, particularly the Southeast Asian countries, have actually adopted a strategy in between balancing and bandwagoning, called "hedging" (Kuik, 2008).

The term hedging is defined as under the situation of high uncertainties and high stakes, a small state adopts multiple policy options and maintains cooperative relationship with different major powers to reduce risks in the international system (Kuik, 2008). Lim and Cooper (2015) indicated that hedging is an ambiguity-generating strategy, which small states signal the extent of their shared security with great powers. In sum, small states attempt to develop good relations with all major powers, but they just cannot go too close or too distant with any of them (Kuik, 2008, p. 164). For Vietnam, the country does this via its multidirectional and multilateralisation foreign policy (Thayer, 2017).

Generally, the hedging concept has been used to explain small and middle powers' foreign policies toward China since the end of the Cold War. However, the explanatory power of this concept itself is now being challenged, both in theory and in practice. Theoretically, the hedging literature has primarily focused on a dyad of nations, but little has been done in the case when small and middle powers are caught between two great powers, or in trilateral relations (Wu, 2017, p. 199). Practically, given the strained relations between Washington and Beijing, the policy options of small states have been significantly constrained. As a result, whether the hedging strategy can sustain or how it will evolve is worth investigating. In Kuik's argument, states are able to hedge when there exist some conditions, including: (1) the absence of an immediate threat; (2) the absence of any ideological fault-lines that divide states into opposing camps; and (3) the absence of an all-out great powers rivalry that force states to take sides (Kuik, 2008, p. 165). However, the third condition seems to have no longer

been kept intact in the context of escalating competition and rivalry between Washington and Beijing for influence in the region.

In particular, while the US views the Southeast Asian region as a critical springboard to counter China's rise, China considers this area as a testing ground or a pilot area for it to practice as a major power in the world (Stromseth, 2019). Because of overlapping objectives, both tend to compete intensely for influence there. In the view of regional countries, both the US and China are equally important and influential to them. While the former has more diplomatic and military influence, the latter possesses more economic influence in the region (Rand, 2020). Accordingly, small and middle powers attempt to have constructive relations with both of them, and still prefer to respond in an equivocal manner toward the initiatives proposed by both the US and China to simultaneously reap benefits from these two major powers.

Nevertheless, neither Washington nor Beijing is doing this without the expectation of receiving something in return. They are thus leveraging their own security and economic influence to force in-between states to pick side. In some multilateral meetings, both the U.S. and Chinese delegations even sought to convince other nations to side with their country (Stromseth, 2019, pp. 2–3). Another example is, in the 5G race with China, the US has pressured other countries to ban Chinese technology giant Huawei from their 5G telecoms network (Helm, 2020). More importantly, the recent hardening rhetoric of the U.S. official thinking toward China triggers great pressure on the U.S. allies and partners to distance themselves from China. Against this backdrop, regional states today are facing unprecedented side-taking pressure. In other words, the ability to hedge of these states has been eroded greatly.

From ambivalent to proactive: Vietnam's responses to FOIP strategy

Indo-Pacific strategy and Vietnam's role

Since 2017, the Indo-Pacific concept has gradually been elaborated and complemented by different U.S. officials and relevant departments. In the 2017 NSS Report, the Indo-Pacific was defined to stretch "from the west coast of India to the western shores of the US" (The Trump White House, 2017, pp. 45–46). In April 2018, Alex Wong, Deputy Assistant Secretary in the East Asian and Pacific Affairs Bureau at the U.S. State Department in a speech first upgraded Indo-Pacific vision to Indo-Pacific strategy. In Wong's explanation, the most important components of FOIP strategy are essentially "free" and "open." The key attributes of the qualifier "free" consist of free from coercion and good governance (fundamental rights, transparency,

and anti-corruption), while the term “open” entails open sea lines of communication and airways, open logistics (infrastructure), open investment, and open trade (Wong, 2018).

The U.S. Department of Defense and Department of State’s reports on FOIP were consecutively released on June and November 2019, which provided more details on the framework, dimensions, implementation and progress of the strategy. The Department of Defense’s Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, released in June 2019 at the time of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, listed four common principles that all countries in the region should uphold, including: respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations; peaceful resolution of disputes; free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity, and adherence to international rules and norms, including those of freedom of navigation and overflight (U.S. DoS, 2019, p. 6).

Many specific policies and measures have been taken to advance FOIP strategy. For security dimension, first of all, the US, together with Japan, India, and Australia restarted an informal strategic dialogue – the Quad in November 2017. In a recent meeting in October 2020 in Japan, these four countries even discussed the possibility of institutionalising the Quad (Times of India, 2020). Notably, Quad plays an important role in FOIP since the US attaches much importance to the security cooperation between the US and its allies in preserving the rules-based order. With this regard, Quad and FOIP have often been linked together (Tan, 2020, p. 133). Second, on 31 May 2018, the U.S. Department of Defense decided to rename the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (IPCOM) to attach greater importance to India in particular and Indian Ocean in general. Under the framework of FOIP, the IPCOM’s U.S. Pacific Fleet has increased the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), which are carried out within 12-miles of China’s artificial islands in the SCS. According to the official data released by the U.S. Pacific Fleet, compared to no operations in 2014, the US carried out two FONOPs in 2015, three in 2016, six in 2017, five in 2018, and nine in 2019 (Power, 2020). In the same vein, the bipartisan Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), which was inked on 31 December 2018, also reiterated that the US and allies should cooperate to confront common challenges (U.S. Congress ARIA, 2018, Sec. 102, p. 4). Section 213 recommended further joint maritime and Freedom of Navigation exercises in the ECS and SCS (U.S. Congress ARIA, 2018, Sec. 213, p. 16).

Initially, FOIP was designed first and foremost as a security initiative, so there was an obvious shortage of economic content in the early stage. However, the US has mapped out some soft plans and policies to complement the hard-power security domain. Among those, a focus on infrastructure development assistance has drawn the attention of regional states that

have huge infrastructure needs. At the first Indo-Pacific Business Forum held in Washington in July 2018, the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the US would spend US\$113.5 for new economic initiatives that support digital economy, energy security, and sustainable infrastructure development (Pompeo, 2018). Notably, the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act (BUILD Act), which was signed into law in October 2018, paved the way for establishing a new infrastructure financing company called the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (USDFC). The newly-formed USDFC was consolidated by the Development Credit Authority (DCA) of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) (USAID., 2018). More importantly, its development finance capacity was raised up to US\$60 billion, more than doubling OPIC's current \$29 billion funding capacity (Runde & Bandura, 2018). Additionally, at the second Indo-Pacific Business Forum held in Thailand in November 2019, the US launched a proposal called Blue Dot Network, with the view of promoting and certifying quality infrastructure investment projects in the Indo-Pacific region. To this end, the USDFC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the development finance agencies of Japan and Australia, including Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), respectively to ensure that the certified projects abide by the quality infrastructure principles as set out in the G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment (U.S. DoS, 2020).

In recent strategic reports, Vietnam is positioned as a burgeoning like-minded partner that the US is prioritising to strengthen relationship with in the Indo-Pacific region (U.S. DoD, 2019; U.S. DoS, 2019). The 2017 NSS report mentioned that the US would strengthen partnerships with Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and helped these countries to become cooperative maritime partners (The Trump White House, 2017, p. 47). The 2018 NDS also reiterated the U.S. military cooperation with regional countries, including Vietnam (U.S. DoD, 2018). During the early formation of FOIP, Secretary of Defense James Mattis' visit to Vietnam in January 2018 was even depicted as an Indo-Pacific visit; and it was also during this visit that Vietnam was referred to as a U.S. like-minded partner (Ferdinando, 2018). The importance of Vietnam in the FOIP strategy has grown as shown in the Indo-Pacific reports released by the U.S. Department of Defense and Department of State in June and November 2019. The *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, released in June 2019, stated that the US is prioritising strengthening relations with Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. For Vietnam, the *Report* read, the Department of Defense is building a strategic partnership with Vietnam on the basis of common interests and principles, which include freedom of navigation, respect for a rules-based order in accordance with

international law, and recognition of national sovereignty (U.S. DoD, 2019, pp. 36–37).

Vietnam's growing role in FOIP strategy can be attributed to the country's strong stance towards China, its intrinsically enduring endorsement for the US-led international order, and its close relations with the Quad members. First of all, due to the legacy of war with China as well as maritime conflicts in the SCS, Vietnam has never stopped suspecting China's intentions and ambitions. As Kurlantzick (2018) noted, among all Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam has the least illusions about the rise of China. The country is also the most willing to adopt a hardening China policy to prevent Chinese dominance in the SCS and in the region. Second, along with the rise of China, there is growing convergence of interests between Vietnam and the US to maintain an open, rules-based international order. China's coercive assertion and ignorance of the international law in the SCS have driven Vietnam to have every reason to be more supportive of the US and its allies in maintaining the regional balance-of-power status quo (Le, 2020, p. 20). Moreover, given Vietnam's close security ties with all four Quad members, it has already been regarded as a discreet partner of the Quad (Kurlantzick, 2018, p. 8). All of these factors make Vietnam stand out as an increasingly important partner for the US in the region.

Both the US and Vietnam can benefit from cooperation under the FOIP framework. The US supposes that Vietnam's support for FOIP could strengthen the legitimacy of FOIP in the region; and in the event of a regional conflict, Vietnam can provide its Southeast Asia's largest military power and well-trained troops, and provide access to its strategic deep-water port – Cam Ranh Bay to the US (Jordan, Stern, & Lohman, 2012, p. 1; Kurlantzick, 2018, pp. 6–7). In the same vein, Vietnam can also benefit greatly from an upgraded relationship with the US, in which the country can leverage this to bargain with China in the SCS by linking some concepts in FOIP with its efforts to multilateralise the SCS dispute issues (Kurlantzick, 2018, p. 6).

In fact, since the second term of Obama administration, the U.S.-Vietnam relations have gained critical momentum, particularly in the military cooperation. Specifically speaking, the US carrier strike group USS Carl Vinson and USS Theodore Roosevelt made two port visits to Da Nang, Vietnam in March 2018 and March 2020, respectively. The US is also assisting Vietnam to improve its defense capabilities by providing Vietnam military equipment, training and technical assistance (U.S. DoD, 2019, pp. 36–37). During the Covid-19 pandemic, Vietnam donated millions of face masks and medical equipment to the US, and facilitated the shipment of DuPont protective suits to the US (Reuters, 2020). U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Daniel Kritenbrink even hailed Vietnam as “a friend in need is a friend indeed” and

“trusted partner” of the US (Tuan Duyen, 2020). The next section will discuss Vietnam’s responses to FOIP strategy in practice.

Vietnam’s responses: cautious in security dimension while proactive in economic domain

Vietnam was among the earliest Southeast Asian countries to publicly “welcome” the vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, there seems to be a dividing line between Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and defense officials regarding how Vietnam should respond to FOIP. While Vietnam MOFA has shown little reluctance in adopting the word “Indo-Pacific” in its official diplomatic discourses or reports, defense officials prefer a “wait and see” approach.

Immediately after choosing Vietnam to announce the vision for FOIP in an APEC meeting in November 2017, the U.S. President Trump made a state visit to Vietnam at the invitation of the late President of Vietnam Tran Dai Quang. In the joint statement released after the meeting, the word “Indo-Pacific region” was mentioned two times. It stated that the US and Vietnam welcomed initiatives that aim to preserve peace and stability and to advance cooperation and development in the Indo-Pacific region (Vietnam Embassy, 2017). During the visit to India in March 2018, Tran Dai Quang reiterated the importance of preserving a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. Quang also discussed the need to uphold international law, freedom of navigation and overflight, sustainable development, free, fair and open trade and investment system with the Indian counterpart (VGN., 2018).

Vietnam MOFA seems to hold a rather favourable view toward the contents of FOIP strategy. When being asked about Vietnam’s stance towards FOIP in August 2018, Vietnam MOFA’s spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang hinted Vietnam’s support for FOIP by saying that “Vietnam welcomes initiatives and efforts to connect the region, which contribute to this goal (connecting the region).” But Hang added that participating in this initiative (FOIP) must ensure Vietnam’s independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and national interests (Bao Quoc te, 2018). Contrary to MOFA, Vietnamese defense officials adopted a more cautious approach as Vietnam’s Minister of Defense, General Ngo Xuan Lich did not mention a word about FOIP during the 17th Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018 despite the overwhelming discussions of FOIP during the conference (Le, 2018, p. 5). Overall, Vietnamese defense leaders’ rather muted response to FOIP during the early stage can be understandable since little was known about how the US would operationalise this strategy at that time. Given the uncertainty in the U.S. commitment, like most countries in the

region, the strategy Vietnam adopted back then was to “wait and see” (Jung et al., 2021; Tan, 2020).

However, as the framework of FOIP gets more concrete, Vietnam has sent clearer and more positive signals to the US, especially after the U.S. Department of Defense released the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* in June 2019. In August 2019, Vietnam ambassador to India, Pham Sanh Chau told to Indian officials in a banquet that Vietnam “supports” the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy. He urged Vietnam and India should preserve the rules-based order, including freedom of navigation and overflight as regulated in the 1982 UNCLOS (Pham, 2019). More notably, the *Vietnam Defense White Paper* released in November 2019 read that, “as long as it is in line with Vietnam’s capabilities and interests, Vietnam is willing to participate in security and defense cooperation mechanisms... including security and defense mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region.” (Vietnam MoND, 2019, p. 28). That the Indo-Pacific was written in such an official defense document illustrates that Vietnam has been more open in lending support to this strategy.

As mentioned above, FOIP strategy first evolved as a security initiative, afterwards the economic dimension was added up to soften down the security component, making the FOIP gradually become a “dual-purpose” strategy. Given this, Vietnam’s responses and involvement into FOIP can be divided into how the country has reacted to these two dimensions.

On security dimension, some tenets of FOIP such as respect for sovereignty and independence; freedom of navigation and overflight; free from coercion, etc. are highly compatible with Vietnam’s security policy and interests. Thus, it is expected that Vietnam would wholly embrace FOIP’s security domain (Kurlantzick, 2018, pp. 4–6). However, in reality, Vietnam still keeps rather low-key attitude to the security cooperation under the framework of FOIP. Vietnam has been consistent with “*Three Noes*” defense policy, i.e., “no alliances with foreign powers, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil, no allying with one country to counter another” during the past few years. In the 2019 Defense White Book, another principle, i.e., “not using force or threatening to use force in international relations” was added to form the “*Four Noes*” policy (Vietnam MoND, 2019). There is little doubt that this defense policy has, to some extent, hindered Vietnam from speeding up security ties with the US. Vietnam thus tends to adopt a “pick and choose” strategy, i.e., primarily strengthening maritime cooperation with the US to balance against China’s pressure in the SCS.

Given the lingering territorial disputes in the SCS and the country’s asymmetric power in comparison with China, Vietnam has focused on strengthening its maritime capacity during the last few years. Thus, Vietnam is highly receptive of the U.S. military assistance, which can

enhance its maritime power. Since the second term of President Obama until the launch and implementation of FOIP strategy, the US has provided Vietnam with Scan Eagle Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, T-6 trainer aircraft, a former U.S. Coast Guard high-endurance cutter, and small patrol boats and their associated training and maintenance facilities (U.S. DoD, 2019, pp. 36–37). It is not hard to see that most of these defense facilities and equipment are related to the enhancement of maritime capacity of Vietnam.

Many Vietnamese strategists and policy makers believe that only the US has both the necessary power and political will to contain China's strategic ambitions, especially in the SCS (Le, 2020, p. 8). Thus, by echoing freedom of navigation, freedom of overflight, and the rule of law on the sea, Vietnam is assumed to take advantage of the FOIP to counter Chinese threats in the SCS (Jung et al., 2021, p. 8).

In the name of FOIP, the US has increased its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) missions within 12-miles of China's artificial islands in the SCS. The FONOPs are considered to be able to strengthen Vietnam's and other claimants' sovereignty claims in the contested waters, and to prevent China from seizing Vietnam's occupied features in the SCS (Choong, 2019, p. 421). Accordingly, though Vietnamese authorities have not made official statement on the U.S. FONOPs, it tends to endorse these operations. The state media and newspapers are currently allowed to report extensively on the U.S. ships' activities in the SCS.

On 13 July 2020, the White House released a report regarding the U.S. position on maritime claims in the SCS, which indicated Beijing's claims to most of the SCS are completely unlawful, and Washington would stand with Southeast Asian allies and partners in protecting their sovereign rights to offshore resources within their exclusive economic zones (Pompeo, 2020a). According to a Hanoi-based strategist, this represents a crucial shift in the U.S. policy toward SCS, and a victory for Vietnam.¹ In response to the U.S. statement the following day, Vietnam MOFA noted that, "Vietnam welcomes countries' positions on the East Sea (Vietnam's term for the SCS) issues which are consistent with the international law and shares the view, as stated in the statement issued on the occasion of the 36th ASEAN Summit that the 1982 UNCLOS acts as the legal framework to regulate all activities in the seas and oceans." (Vietnam MOFA, 2020b). Despite not directly mentioning the US by name, Hanoi's response is obviously to endorse the U.S. position. Next, according to a report by Vietnamese media, Vietnam's ambassador to the US, Ha Kim Ngoc in a meeting with U.S. House of Representative, Joaquin Castro in Washington on 19 July 2020 even "highly appreciated" the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee and House Foreign Affairs Committee for having issued a statement affirming the White House's above statement that China's claims in the SCS are

unlawful (Phuong Vu, 2020). This denotes a clear manifestation that Vietnam is highly supportive of the US's decision to clarify its position on the SCS.

As China took provocative actions in the SCS such as conducting military drills, continuing militarisation of man-made islands, ramming Vietnam's fishing boats, etc., Vietnam became more proactive in lending support to the US. In the ASEAN-U.S. meeting at the sideline of the 53rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM-53) and Related Meetings in September 10, 2020, Vietnam Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh even highly appraised the "constructive and responsive contributions" that the US has made to ASEAN's efforts to maintaining the peace, stability and developments in the SCS (Bloomberg, 2020).

However, contrary to the open and high-profile appraisal of the U.S. involvement in the SCS under FOIP, Vietnam tends to downplay the importance and salience of other defense and security cooperation under FOIP. In other words, Vietnam tends to operate cautiously in other security cooperation domains with the US. Evidence can be found from Vietnam's reluctance to procure weapons from the US after the long-standing embargo on lethal weapon sales to Vietnam was fully lifted in May 2016. Not until August 2018 did Vietnam first sign a \$US94.7 million military contract with the US (Vietnam MOFA, 2018). The reason behind Vietnam's reluctance could be because of compatibility and interoperability problem between the U.S. weapons and Vietnamese existing weapon system, of which many items were purchased from Russia (Grossman, 2018, p 129).

Furthermore, Vietnam is still reluctant to conduct formal joint exercises with the US despite having actively engaged in the US-proposed Naval Engagement Activity (NEA) since 2010. To date, the U.S.-Vietnam NEA has not exceeded the scope of non-combatant exercises and low-level exchanges (U.S. Pacific Fleet, 2017). In mid-October 2018, Vietnam even unilaterally cancelled 15 defense engagement activities with the US which had been scheduled for 2019 involving army, navy and air force exchanges (Le, 2020, p. 15). After the USS Carl Vinson carrier strike group made a historic visit to Da Nang, Vietnam in 2018, the US expected to make a second similar port call to Vietnam in the following year (Reuters, 2019). Yet, Vietnam rejected this requirement; and it was not until March 2020 that the second port call was realised. Another example is, in May 2020, Vietnam was invited to the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), but ultimately did not attend in August 2020 (Olson, 2020).

This paper argues that China was an important reason behind Vietnam's above-mentioned decisions. While Vietnam recognises significant benefits from strengthening security ties with the US, it does not want China to perceive that Hanoi is picking side in the U.S.-China competition. Thus,

Vietnam tends to slow down the pace of cooperation with the US when it assumes some Vietnam-U.S. defense engagement activities might offend or provoke China. To ease the concerns of China, Hanoi often dispatches envoys to Beijing before some major Vietnam-U.S. defense activities take place. A well-informed Vietnamese diplomat revealed that several months prior to the USS Carl Vinson's visit, Vietnamese diplomats had been sent to Beijing to work with their Chinese counterparts. During the port visit, some Vietnamese high-level officials even turned down the invitation to embark on the U.S. ship for fear of "being hated" by China.²

Some attribute Vietnam's decisions to other factors, such as U.S. sanctions on countries buying arms from Russia and Covid-19 pandemic. Although these factors might seem important too, they are not that convincing. First, Vietnam's cancellation of defense engagement activities with the US might not be driven by the factor "U.S. sanctions on countries buying arms from Russia." The reason is, before Vietnam made this decision in mid-October 2018, it had been exempt from *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)* in July 2018. That means Vietnam could continue buying Russian military equipment without any U.S. sanctions (Defense World, 2018). Second, Covid-19 dynamic is not a totally persuasive reason behind Vietnam's no-show at RIMPAC 2020. If it had been for the pandemic, then Vietnam should have also denied joining the Army Games 2020 Military Sports and Army Technical Forum Army held from August 23 to September 5, 2020 in Russia. Rather, Vietnam still dispatched a delegation to participate in 11 competitions of these military events, which China also joined (Lao Dong, 2020). All of the above examples illustrate that Vietnam is still adopting a rather cautious approach to the security dimension in the FOIP strategy; instead the country has chosen to work selectively with the US in the SCS issue based on its immediate national interests.

Compared with the security dimension, Vietnam has somehow shown more willingness to work with the US on the economic domain. The US has been Vietnam's top trading partner since the two countries normalised diplomatic relations in 1995. The bilateral trade dramatically increased from US\$450 million in 1995 to US\$90.79 billion in 2020 (Vietnam Customs, 2021). However, the growth in bilateral trade also gives rise to many problems, including: the lingering trade imbalance and the U.S. accusation of Vietnam's manipulating currency to facilitate its exports to the US. These two issues became more prominent during the Trump administration since President Trump sought to repair the unfair trade practices with other countries.

The US's trade deficit with Vietnam was US\$63.37 billion in 2020, and the US has repeatedly warned Vietnam to take measures to cut the

imbalance. In an interview with *Fox News Channel* in 2019, President Trump even said that Vietnam was “almost the single worst abuser of everybody.” (Boudreau & Mai, 2019). Given the sizeable trade surplus with the US, Vietnam was labelled as a currency manipulator by the U.S. Treasury on December 16, 2020. Apart from refuting this claim, Vietnam has shown goodwill and pledged to take initiatives to coordinate with the US. Through phone talks with the U.S. counterparts, Vietnamese leaders promised to reduce the trade surplus by importing more goods from the US. At the same time, Vietnam has also been insistent that its currency policy is merely for the sake of inflation control and macro economy stabilisation, not to create competitive advantage in international trade (Phuong Anh, 2021).

In addition to showing cooperative attitude to some problems in the bilateral trade, Vietnam has expressed hope to attract more investment and development finance from the US for its increasing infrastructure demands. By attracting investment from the U.S. investors, Vietnam expects to further join the US-led supply chain. In the Vietnam-U.S. Trade Forum held on November 18, 2020, the message was delivered to the US by Vietnam Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade Do Thang Hai. Hai stated that, with regard to strengths in technology, finance, and managerial experience, American investors are always welcome in Vietnam, particularly in some high value-added fields, helping to elevate Vietnam’s position in the global supply chain (Tu Uyen, 2020).

In reality, many China-based companies in the US-led supply chain have started moving parts of their manufacturing to Vietnam. Thus, Vietnam is emerging as a cost-competitive alternative to enterprises which plan to implement China plus one strategy, especially Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese companies. Broadly speaking, Vietnam is now playing an increasingly important role in the U.S. decoupling strategy from China in the long run. At a news conference in Washington in April 2020, the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the US was discussing restructuring global supply chains with Indo-Pacific friends, including India, Australia, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea and New Zealand (Louis, 2020). The importance of Vietnam in the restructuring supply chains in FOIP strategy seems to be critically high as the country was addressed as the U.S. Indo-Pacific friend. In responding to the invitation, Vietnam MOFA revealed in a press conference that Vietnam already worked with the US, Japan, India, Australia, South Korea and New Zealand to discuss the reopening and economic recovery in the post-pandemic period (Vietnam MOFA, 2020a).

Providing development finance for infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific region is among the main contents of economic dimension in the FOIP strategy. In a meeting with Vietnam’s ambassador to the US, Ha Kim Ngoc in Washington in June 2020, Chief Executive Officer of the U.S.

International Development Finance Corporation (USDFC), Adam Boehler said that the US identified Vietnam as one of U.S. priority partners in the regional projects, including the production of strategic products in the U.S. supply chain (Viet Anh, 2020). For Vietnam, it has been well aware of this and has proactively expressed expectation to receive the U.S. financing for its projects. In a meeting with Adam Boehler in Hanoi in October 2020, the Head of the Vietnamese Communist Party Central Economic Commission Nguyen Van Binh directly conveyed Vietnam's message to the U.S. representative by saying Vietnam wants to become the US's credible and trusted partner, expecting USDFC and U.S. Eximbank to play a more active role in boosting trade and investment activities between the two countries (TTXVN, 2020).

At the sidelines of the 2020 Indo-Pacific Business Forum (IPBF) in Hanoi at the end of October 2020, Vietnam and the US inked on seven investment and cooperation agreements worth billions of U.S. dollars in terms of energy, power transmission, processing and agriculture, etc. Most notably, energy cooperation projects account for the majority given Vietnam's high demand for energy for its development while the US is seeking to increase its investment in energy sector in Asia. Among those, three U.S. enterprises: Bechtel Corporation, General Electric and McDermott signed an agreement to provide equipment and services worth more than US\$3 billion for a liquefied natural gas (LNG)-to-power project in Vietnam's southern Bac Lieu province. This is the first foreign private sector-owned-and-led energy project, which was ratified in Vietnam's national power development master plan (Duong Ngoc, 2020). It is therefore regarded as a flagship model in Vietnam-U.S. economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

Discussion

The above analysis suggests that Vietnam's overall responses and attitude toward FOIP strategy are positive as almost all tenets of this strategy are highly compatible with the country's national interests. However, Vietnam's support for FOIP is still kept at a rather selective manner. Differences can be found in the ways Vietnam responded to and participated in the security and economic dimension of this strategy.

With regards to security, Vietnam has been proactively pushing cooperation with the US in terms of maritime capacity enhancement, which is ultimately beneficial to defend its sovereignty and constrain China's influence in the SCS. But as to other security or defense domains, Vietnam still prefers a step-by-step approach, and somewhat deliberately keeps the security relationship with the US at a low profile. Economically, Vietnam acts as a burgeoning role in the U.S. efforts to restructure global supply

chains and decouple from China. As a result, Vietnam attempts to take advantage of the current investment transfer trends to promote its national economic development, to realise the industrial upgrading, and ultimately to engage more deeply into the US-led supply chains. Given this, Vietnam has shown little reluctance to embrace the economic elements of FOIP strategy as the above empirical examples illustrate.

The rationale behind Vietnam's seemingly dual response pattern can be attributed to factors from Vietnam, the US, and China. From the Vietnamese perspective, as stated above, Vietnam's consistent "*Three Noes*" defense policy, or the upgraded "*Four Noes*" policy has apparently set clear constraints on its cooperation with the US under the FOIP. For example, with the limitations in the second "*No*" (no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil), Vietnam has not opened the possibility for the U.S. carrier strike group to make annual port visit to the strategic Cam Ranh Bay despite considerable improvement in Vietnam-U.S. relations. In other words, Vietnam tends to keep the partnership with the US at a low-key manner for fear of being labelled as seeking an alignment with the US.

Vietnam expects to send a message that cooperating with the US is just a way to demonstrate its autonomy to make friends in international relations, which is a part of its multidirectional and multilateralisation foreign policy (Thayer, 2017). Bilaterally, Vietnam has signed a variety of comprehensive partnerships, strategic partnerships, and comprehensive strategic partnerships with other countries. By doing this, Vietnam not only seeks to boost trade and investment with some particular countries, but also gains added layers of security benefits. For example, Vietnam has sought to bolster security cooperation with Japan, India, and Australia in recent years. Specifically, Vietnam hosts an annual defense dialogue with India and Australia. On a three-day visit to Vietnam in October 2020, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga also declared to bolster defense and security ties with Vietnam by signing an agreement for Japan to transfer military equipment and technology to Vietnam (Vu Han, 2020). Multilaterally, Vietnam is playing a growing role in many regional and international platforms. It was elected as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the second time for 2020–2021; served as the ASEAN Chair for the third time in 2020. Also, Vietnam is a key player in numerous Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). To date, it has inked 15 different bilateral and multilateral FTAs, including two mega agreements: Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (Vietnam WTO, 2021). These are fundamental mechanisms by which Vietnam pursue its multi-pronged approach to diplomacy.

Furthermore, from its experiences of dealings with the Soviet Union and China in the past, Vietnam has also been wary of being sold out by larger

powers. What concerns Vietnam now is moving closer to the US is likely to get trapped into the chessboard of big-power politics. Many Vietnamese leaders keep the belief that, for the American, interests in the U.S.-China relations are much greater than those in the U.S.-Vietnam relations; consequently, once Washington realises rapprochement with Beijing, Hanoi's interests will be sacrificed;³ and it is unlikely that Washington will assist Vietnam in case of an armed conflict with China over SCS (Le, 2020, p. 15). As a result, Hanoi's strategic thinkers have not really reached a consensus on how Vietnam should participate in the FOIP. As a result, Vietnamese officials have somehow sent mixed signals towards the US, such as Vietnamese ambassadors to the US and India directly voiced support for the strategy while domestically Vietnamese official statements on FOIP tend to withhold any mention of the US by name.

Vietnam's cautious and selective strategy toward FOIP is also attributed to the U.S. factor. The political systems of the two countries are so different that it causes a faction of Vietnamese leaders to believe that the US has ill intentions and plans to spur the process of peaceful evolution in Vietnam, and to ultimately subvert the Communist Party of Vietnam (Nguyen Phuong, 2018, p. 63). That the US often criticises Vietnam on human rights record, freedom of religion, etc. has deepened Vietnamese leaders' suspicion of the U.S. intentions (Le, 2020, pp. 12–13). Moreover, the US often links trade with human rights in its dealings with Vietnam also triggers great suspicion from Vietnam (Nguyen Phuong, 2018, p. 63). That said, Vietnamese leaders are afraid that the US can leverage its strengthening ties with Vietnam in security and economic to pressure Vietnam to make some changes to its system.

Moreover, President Trump's America First Policy, which led to U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in early 2017, did cause an erosion of trust between Vietnam and the US. Initially, decision to join TPP was controversial among reformist and conservative elements of the Vietnamese government, especially regarding the regulation to legalise independent labour unions (Nguyen Phuong, 2018, p. 64). Ultimately, Vietnamese leaders were determined to join this pact. However, Trump's decision to withdraw the US from TPP bitterly disappointed Hanoi and deepened its suspicion of the U.S. motives. As the former Vietnam's ambassador to the US, Pham Quang Vinh said in an interview on 23 May 2020 that, Trump preferred bilateralism to multilateralism, and what still made Vietnam feel regretful was the US's withdrawal from TPP in the end (Pham, 2020).

Along with the improvement in the bilateral relations these years, the Trump administration indeed deliberately downplayed the human rights issue in its relations with Vietnam, and ensured that the US respects

Vietnam's political system (Le, 2018, p. 4); yet, members of the U.S. Congress still put pressure on the U.S. government to sanction Vietnam for its poor human rights record. Moreover, one of the components of the FOIP strategy, good governance, especially the respect for fundamental rights, might be cautiously interpreted by Vietnam. Furthermore, official concerns about Vietnam's human rights record were also mentioned in the ARIA of 2018. To be specific, Section 401 raises concerns over the rule of law and civil liberties in some "not free" countries, including Vietnam (U.S. Congress ARIA, 2018, p. 22). ARIA serves as an important legal framework within the FOIP, but that it straightforwardly listed Vietnam as "not free" might inevitably cause some unease among Vietnamese leaders. In other words, good governance or respect for human rights in the FOIP is still a hindrance for Vietnam to wholly embrace this strategy.

The above mentioned factors all contribute to Vietnam's hesitation in lending full support to FOIP. Besides, this paper asserts that China factor also plays a significant role in shaping and constraining Vietnam's choices, and how far Vietnam might move forward with FOIP. Simply put, as a well-informed Vietnamese diplomat's observation, China factor acts as a "brake" in Vietnam's foreign policy making.⁴ While the country's foreign policy is totally made in Hanoi, Vietnam has to frequently consider Beijing's possible reactions. The same logic can be adaptable to Vietnam's policy and engagement with the U.S. FOIP strategy.

China's acting as a brake here can be understood in two ways. First and foremost, both Vietnam and China are socialist states. Even though their relations are complicated and entangled, China still matters more to Vietnam than any other countries. A faction of Vietnamese Communist Party cadres still attaches much importance to Marxism-Leninism ideology in developing relationship with countries. Given its ideological proximity with that of China, Vietnam tends to prioritise long-term relations with China. Interestingly enough, every time Vietnamese leaders are going to visit a major power, they will pay a visit to China first to show deference to its northern neighbour (Huang, 2017).

Vietnam and China have traditionally established the so-called inter-party channel besides state-to-state level, in which high-ranking officials from Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can exchange ideas and dialogues regularly. This particular channel particularly works when there is a conflict between Vietnam and China. Hanoi often promptly dispatches envoys to Beijing to negotiate and cool down the disputes. Beijing, at the same time, is also believed to exert pressure on Vietnam via this channel. For example, in a conference in 2019, Major General Le Van Cuong, former Director of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Vietnam Ministry of Public Security disclosed that after the

Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the SCS Arbitration released a judgment in favour of claims by the Philippines in 2016, China sent some officials to Vietnam to request Vietnam to implement the so-called “five noes,” including: no voicing support for tribunal judgment, no bringing the issue to ASEAN, no mentioning the issue in multilateral settings, not allowed to raise this matter in China-Vietnam negotiations, and not allowed to sue China (Nguyen Duc, 2019).

Logically, China also resorts to this inter-party channel to affect Vietnam’s policy toward the US in general and FOIP strategy in particular. For example, during the 25th anniversary of Vietnam-US diplomatic relations, Hu Xijin, a well-known editor of the China’s *Global Times*, posted a short commentary entitled, “*Telling some big truths to Vietnamese*” on his *Weibo* account. In this article, Hu directly warned Vietnam not to get fooled by the U.S. goodwill since the US is merely utilising Vietnam to wedge into Sino-Vietnam relations. Hu ended by saying both China and Vietnam are socialist countries, and it is hard for Vietnam’s political system to survive without China’s political stability (Hu, 2020). Despite not being officially mentioned by Chinese leaders, what Hu mentioned is intrinsically a reflection of Chinese thinking in dealings with Vietnam. China often gives warnings toward Vietnam in its relationship with the US through different official and unofficial ways. Plus, given the conspicuous anti-China rhetoric embedded in FOIP strategy, Vietnam has to consider cautiously when it decides to push forward any activities with the US to avoid being mistakenly interpreted as aligning with the US against China.

Drawing from the above discussion, the first functions that the Chinese brake plays are to pull Vietnam out of leaning too closer to the US, and to keep it under China’s orbit. Essentially, the first connotation of the brake is closely associated with Vietnam-China ideological affinity. However, the brake also has a second function, i.e., pushing Vietnam toward the US. Like almost all sovereign states, national interests are put on the top priority in Vietnam’s relations with other countries. As CPV is the only legal party in Vietnam, national interests are often intertwined with the party’s interests. Protecting national interests can guarantee the legitimacy and survival of CPV. The national interests here can be simply classified into security and economic interests. Considerations for these two dimensions of interests can therefore affect Vietnam’s perceptions and preferences in relations with China and the US, as well as the FOIP strategy.

In terms of security, while Vietnam regards its territory in the SCS as national interests, there exist overlapping claims between Vietnam, China and other countries. Among those, China is perceived by Vietnamese strategists as the most assertive claimant, which can pose great threats to Vietnam’s claimed features. Touching SCS disputes with China, Vietnamese

leaders, including General Secretary and President Nguyen Phu Trong, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, etc. have recently declared that preserving the national interests is always the top priority of Party and State (Quang Phong, 2019). This signals that when there is a conflict between ideology and national interests, the latter prevails.

Against this backdrop, Vietnam has taken both internal balancing and external balancing measures to protect its national interests in the face of China's pressure and threats. In many Vietnamese strategic thinkers, the US is the only country to have the power and willing to contain China's strategic ambitions (Le, 2020, p. 8). The former Vietnam's ambassador to the US, Le Van Bang contended that only the US could effectively help Vietnam protect sovereignty while China always seizes the opportunity to encroach upon Vietnam's territorial integrity (Le, 2016). Given this, Vietnam has sought to relax its self-restrained defense policy by signalling the livelihood of cooperating with other countries in the event of conflict in SCS. Specifically, besides "Four Noes" principle, "One Depend" was inserted into the 2019 Defense White Paper. It reads "depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defense and military relations with other countries on the basis of respecting each other's independence, sovereignty territorial unity and integrity as well as fundamental principles of international law, cooperation for mutual benefits and common interests of the region and international community" (Vietnam MoND, 2019, p. 25). This clearly offers Vietnam a great deal of flexibility in its defense policy that was not there before. In other words, with this newly-added principle, Vietnam can bolster security ties with any country if its sovereignty and independence are threatened.

For the above reasons, this article argues that when China takes some over-expected actions detrimental to Vietnam's national interests in the SCS, Vietnam tends to show high willingness of cooperation and move closer to the US under FOIP. But as Vietnam realises that its interests are still guaranteed, or the strategic rivalry between Washington and Beijing gets more intensified, Hanoi tends to tone down the intimate relationship with Washington to avoid offending Beijing and being labelled as an anti-China state.

With regards to economic dimension, the China factor also produces some particular effects on Vietnam's decision to engage with the FOIP strategy. China has continuously been Vietnam's largest trading partner for 16 consecutive years from 2004 to 2020, accounting for 20~25% of Vietnam's foreign trade. Data from the Vietnam Customs Statistics shows that in 2020, Vietnam-China's total trade turnover reached US\$133.06 billion, in which Vietnam exported US\$48.87 billion worth of goods to China and imported US\$84.19 billion from China (Vietnam Customs, 2021). In trade relationship

with China, Vietnam lies at an unfavourable position as its trade deficit with China keeps rising year over year. A large number of raw materials, machinery and equipment and its parts needed for labour-intensive manufacturing in Vietnam are heavily dependent on Chinese market. This phenomenon is widely perceived as detrimental for Vietnam's development and national security in the long run. Accordingly, Vietnamese policy makers have sought to mitigate this ever-growing reliance by urging Vietnamese enterprises to diversify their import sources from other countries to disperse the risks from excessive reliance on a single market (Vu, 2020).

During the last few years, investment from China to Vietnam has been dramatically increasing with the implementation of BRI. Plus, in the context of U.S.-China trade war, there has witnessed a surge in the amount of Chinese investment to Vietnam since the early 2018. Specifically, in 2018, China invested US\$2.5 billion to Vietnam, with an increase of 19% compared to 2017; to 2019, the number dramatically rose to US\$4.1 billion, 64% higher than 2018 (FIA Vietnam, 2020). Nevertheless, Chinese investment in Vietnam is often negatively viewed by most Vietnamese people as "low-quality, outdated and environment-polluted technology, detrimental to Vietnam's development and national security, etc." This poor reputation is largely driven by some notorious China-backed projects in Vietnam such as Cat Linh-Ha Dong metro line in Hanoi (Nguyen Tuyen, 2018).

In a report submitted to Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc in August 2018, Vietnam Ministry of Planning and Investment specified several projects using China's loans, equipment and executed by Chinese contractors as "slow progress, poor quality and cost overruns" (Nguyen Tuyen, 2018). This was the first time an official government ministry publicly indicated the problems and drawbacks of Chinese investment projects in Vietnam. Besides, Vietnamese scholars and experts also expressed their concerns regarding the debt trap in China-funded projects in a BRI conference in Hanoi in 2017 (Phuong Vu, 2017).

Accordingly, Vietnam believes that cementing economic relations with the US is beneficial for its sustainable economic development, and can act as a counterweight to China eventually. As such, it is rather reasonable for Vietnam to embrace the economic elements within the FOIP strategy through importing more goods from the US, and welcoming the US-backed projects as stated above. More imports from the US can not only narrow the trade imbalance between Vietnam and the US, but also diversify trade partners, hence gradually reduce dependence on China. Vietnam's proactive engagement with the USDFC, a signatory development finance institution under FOIP strategy also reflects that the country expects to receive more favourable, high-quality loans from the US for its growing demand for

infrastructure projects, instead of Chinese loans, which not only are less favourable but also have too many tied conditions.

Conclusion

The US often portrays the ongoing U.S.-China rivalry as a competition between free and repressive visions of the future international order. In the face of such intensifying great-power competition, in-between states are facing a dilemma as shown in a Vietnamese saying, *“when buffalo and ox fight, it is the fly that suffers.”* The US and China either induce or pressure lesser powers to take a decisive turn towards one side at the expense of the other, and this has deteriorated the hedging ability of these states. However, it is widely argued that regional states still attempt to avoid being entangled in the U.S.-China competition by sticking to their non-alignment strategy and seeking regional multilateral cooperation.

In this scenario, since the launch of FOIP strategy in 2017, most Southeast Asian countries have adopted a “wait and see” or “pick and choose” strategy. Understandably, due to their extensive economic links with China, most regional states do not want to commit themselves to an anti-China bloc led by the US. To date, except for Indonesia and Vietnam, few Southeast Asians have publicly illustrated their views on the FOIP. Vietnam was amongst the earliest countries in Asia to publicly “welcome” the U.S. Indo-Pacific concept. Hanoi has even shown little reluctance to use the term “Indo-Pacific” in its diplomatic discourses and official reports. Plus, as the content and relevance of the FOIP strategy become clearer, Vietnam is subsequently more willing to lend support to and get involved into this strategy.

This article asserts that despite differences in ideology and political system, Vietnam is a burgeoning security and economic partner of the US in the region. Moreover, there is a growing convergence of interests between the two countries in upholding the rules-based international order amid China’s rise and its assertiveness in the SCS. Plus, since most elements of the FOIP strategy are compatible with Vietnam’s national interests, the country intrinsically endorses this strategy, albeit in a rather low-key manner. However, there are some subtle differences in Vietnam’s responses to the security and economic dimensions of FOIP. Simply put, Vietnam still holds a cautious and step-by-step approach toward the security cooperation, while it is rather proactive in economic domain. In other words, rather than taking side entirely with the US, Vietnam seeks cooperation in some selective issues which fit well with its national interests.

The reasons behind Vietnam’s cautious and selective attitude can be attributed to several factors, including constraints in Vietnam’s defense

policy, the interplay of ideology and national interests in its foreign policy making, the U.S. frequent pressure on Vietnam's human rights issue, and China factor. In this article, I argue that China factor plays a critical role in shaping and constraining Vietnam's responses to the FOIP strategy. The China factor acts as a "brake," influencing the speed and scope of cooperation that Vietnam is willing to move forward with the US under FOIP strategy. Since Vietnam and China are socialist states, the CCP matters a lot to CPV's interests and political stability. For Vietnam, maintaining good relations with China is still a priority in its foreign policy. Yet, due to the SCS disputes and its vulnerabilities in the face of China's rise, Vietnam has leveraged its strengthened partnership with the US to improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis China.

Under the Biden Administration, it is still unclear how FOIP will evolve. Yet, one can be sure that the US will continue strengthening ties with its allies and partners, in which further consolidating relations with Vietnam will be prioritised. For Vietnam, it is unlikely that the country will fully side with the US or lend full support to FOIP, especially after the conservative faction in the CPV won in the 13th National Congress held in January 2021. Instead, Hanoi will seek to strike a balance between Washington and Beijing. To be specific, while Hanoi keeps actively engaging with the US on economic dimension and voicing support for the US-led rules-based international order, it will also strengthen party-to-party ties with CPC to find a mutually-acceptable accommodation in the SCS. As such, Beijing can possibly continue to influence the pace and scope of further security cooperation between Hanoi and Washington via such inter-party exchanges with Hanoi.

Notes

1. Corresponding interview with a Hanoi-based Vietnamese diplomat, July 20, 2020.
2. Interview conducted with a former Vietnamese diplomat, Taipei, December 1, 2018.
3. Interview conducted with a former Vietnamese diplomat, Taipei, November 20, 2019.
4. Interview conducted with a former Vietnamese diplomat, Taipei, November 20, 2019.

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