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# Vietnam Pull Between USA and China in the Southeast Asian Region

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**Abstract-- Vietnam is one of the fastest-growing economies in Southeast Asia, a communist country with an open economy. It's a gateway for the trading route. The South China Sea dispute is a major concern, as any disruptions can lead to a breakdown of peace and instability in this region. Both superpowers, the USA and China, have investments and need markets for their finished products. Vietnam has good relations with both countries and is in high demand for their objectives.**

**Keywords-- power-game, power-balance, security, economy, South China Sea, maritime, military, ASEAN, naval, bilateral treaty, island, communist, strategic**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is an ambitious country. China and the USA are crucial partners, and China is the most important economic and ideological ally. On the other hand, there are severe maritime problems that remain unresolved. Vietnam was associated with the USA through a multi-dimensional approach involving the USA's naval vessels, which has drawn Vietnam into the USA's strategic considerations for shaping the Asian region. The superpowers, the USA and China, are competing to expand their influence and exploit Southeast Asian countries. Vietnam is the finest example of the 'American-Chinese Competition'. It has a history of bipolarity and is ambitious to compete with developing countries worldwide. It was necessary to help Western and Asian superpowers, especially communist nations (Pietrasiak 2018).

The unification of Vietnam and victory in the war had some side effects. Vietnam has failed to improve its diplomatic relations with China. Russia was influenced more and became dependent on it. The strained relations with Cambodia resulted in the entire Vietnamese economy collapsing. Therefore, it has adopted an excellent vision to attain friendly relations with all nations and attain harmony, advancement, and liberation. Vietnam's diplomacy centres on regional and international compromise; it also seeks to resolve disputes with neighbours while keeping its self-interest in mind. It has made positive moves to integrate its economy with the global economy.

Vietnam has built a good reputation as a friendly country by joining the ARF in 1994, ASEAN in 1995, APEC in 1998, and the EAS in 2005. It hosted the conferences of these International Organisations many times. Vietnam is interested in building relationships with superpowers such as the USA, India, and Japan to seek support in times of need. It has been done mainly to counter Chinese territorial aggression (Pradhan 2020).

Being with China has advantages and threats. In the initial phase of Doi-Moi (the economic reform policy), relations with China were the most important. As a communist country, Vietnam remained close with other communist countries and established good relations with other communist parties. The Chinese economic model is attractive for developing nations like Vietnam (The Beijing Consensus 2013). In 2008, both countries strengthened their relationship by entering a "Comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership", and several economic treaties were signed. On 30 Dec 1999, a long-time border dispute agreement was signed between China and Vietnam. The declaration concerned the South China Sea and consisted of 10 paragraphs aimed at reducing tensions and advancing political relations (Valencia 2003: 34-37).

In 2011, Nguyen Phu Trong, the General Secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party, completed a diplomatic visit to China to sign a peace treaty to settle the territorial dispute (Thayer 2000). China did not cooperate, suspended activities that exposed the territorial dispute, and removed it from efforts to consolidate global interference and to please the USA and Japan. Vietnam reacted to global political aggression. China planned to consolidate its control over the Southeast Asia region based on the following objectives. Firstly, to prevent international exposure of the disputed islands and intervention by foreign countries, particularly the USA. Secondly, to break the ASEAN nations' claims in the territorial dispute. It is important to break environmental control and the USA (Lokshyn 2013: 249). In October 2014, China described pursuing negotiations in multiple phases, culminating in a surprise visit by a 13-member delegation led by Vietnam's Defence Minister, General Phung Quang Thanh.



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## II. POWER GAME IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The gradual withdrawal of the USA from Vietnam has made China the dominant power of Asia. It led to a shift in the balance of power in world politics and obstacles to American interests. Therefore, the USA's claim in the South China Sea is based on two objectives: Firstly, the South China Sea is an economically crucial maritime region for the USA's access to trade. Its openness, which cannot be overlooked, redoubles its value with its commercial and tactical features. China's Law of the Sea in this water will drastically limit accessibility. This Sea is China's 'Exclusive Economic Zone' and does not permit any economic or military activities by third nations in this Sea (Fravel 2012: 299-303). Secondly, an economy's ecological progress requires stability and peace. So, this critical Sea faces many dangers, for instance, Sino-Vietnamese chaos and Separatism. The USA offered administrative assistance in the disputed matter out of self-interest and because of the strong players involved in trade in this region. In this regard, the normal relations between the two countries continued until 1995. Further, it was reinforced at the 2010 ASEAN meeting. Hilary Clinton, who was Secretary of State, gave a speech that promised that the US would support Vietnam in resolving disputes and ending its oppression. To add more, it condemned the use of arms by any pretender and enabled creativity in confidence-building measures. Vietnam adopted an approach that any international assistance would require a joint agreement. The United States was more exposed to the sea clash, which put China's activities in the limelight. China disliked all these for the internationalisation of this dispute (Hoang Viet 2008).

During the second term of the Obama administration, the US shifted its foreign policy strategy from East Asia to Southeast Asia (Lokshyn 2013: 247). After that, the USA strongly revived the ancient coalition with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. They began building good relations with other countries, including India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. US cooperation with Vietnam is essential in this regard. It has the greatest naval supremacy in the Pacific Ocean; any territorial clashes will be an obstacle to U.S. interests. This route is significant as trade worth US\$5 trillion passes through it.

More than half of the world's liquefied natural gas trade passes through this sea route; further, crude oil trade accounts for about 33 per cent (Kurlantzick 2000).

## III. VIETNAM'S PROGRESSIVE ECONOMY: CONTRIBUTED BY THE USA AND CHINA

Americans promote their strategy by implementing fresh creativity in Vietnam and ASEAN. In 2012, the USA founded the 'Expanded Economic Engagement (E3) initiative with ASEAN. A blueprint was planned for economic collaboration to expand trade and investment links with ASEAN and the USA, increasing market access, improving efficiency, and fostering greater awareness of commercial opportunities (Elek 2000). They founded the US-Asia Pacific Comprehensive Partnership for Ecological Energy to connect energy command bases and alleviate energy scarcity (Lieksiutina 2008: 53).

China provides Southeast Asian countries with vessels for their operations and encourages economic and scientific ventures. China preserved marine biodiversity and strengthened patrols along the land boundary. The US adopted more comprehensive diplomatic measures, limiting China's ability to orchestrate disruptive actions and pledging support for navigational freedom. In 2011, Congress promoted mutual relations with the US. It also looks unbearable and has no advantage for Vietnam when China's dealings are measured. The US, Vietnam, and China's dependence requires a cautious and stable approach. Commercially, much of the US clothing industry relies on Vietnam for cheap labour.

In 2000, a bilateral trade treaty was signed by both countries, and Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organisation was completed. The US is Vietnam's second-most important trading partner. There is persistent prosperity in relations, with the US as its largest export partner at USD 33.47 billion (20.66 per cent), and China at about USD 16.56 billion (10.23 per cent). The import is approximately USD 7.7 billion of commodities from the United States, and China's imports were USD 49.4 billion (29.82 per cent) (Vietnam Integrated Trade Solution 2015). On 5 Oct 2015, Vietnam became a member of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The US has FTA's with 6/11 TPP members, but Vietnam does not have any US FTA (Fergusson, McMinimy & Williams 2016).

Vietnam responded to the changing global political scene and tried to achieve its ambitions. The USA and China are the most significant allies of the Vietnam strategem, and it is essential to maintain good relations with them. It is neither overly dependent on China nor does it lack political interest in resolving the sea dispute; it also does not want the International Court of Justice to resolve it.



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Therefore, Vietnam cannot think of war, as bitter memories of 1979 are fresh. Vietnam also strengthens relations with China to counter the power of the USA through deep-chasing and multidimensional engagement with America. Vietnam has attracted the US due to economic ties, projects, and political, cultural, and scientific collaboration, supported in the Spratly and Paracel Islands only by US Navy vessels and peaceful diplomatic talks. In 2016, on 12 July, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled that China had no authority over the islands in the East China Sea. President Xi Jinping condemned the assessment, but Vietnam braced, which gave Vietnam more weight in their clashes with China. In 2016, John Kerry's speech highlighted Vietnam's value to America. (Kerry 2016).

South China Sea safety is trapped in territorial and maritime possession. Vietnam and China's faith in diplomacy and acceptance of the international court's decisions settled the dispute calmly. However, if any state adopted aggressive measures in autonomous areas, in violation of international customs and norms of global behaviour and constructed current defence infrastructure in dubious locations. In that case, the chaotic situation will erupt to no one's advantage, and there is a risk of a clash or hostility. America did not support the individual claim but always supported the liberty of navigation and aviation, as it has always done under the law and welcomed the legal judgments of the recognised organisation, which has multi-dimensional explanations and sustenance (Secretary Kerry: remarks on the TPP 2016). Vietnam was once linked to the American tactic in its axis to Asia. Both countries have progressive trade policies, and Vietnam is aware of its political agenda. Deciphering the South China Sea dispute has become America's priority, whereas Vietnam must be cautious of the bipolar game between two superpowers, the USA and China.

#### IV. VIETNAM'S IMPORTANCE IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIA REGION

Vietnam ranks first in Southeast Asia for three key reasons. Firstly, Vietnam has an excellent S-shaped strategic coastline location; it is the North's gateway. China claimed a 'nine-dash line', which covers the South China Sea, which is unfair to Vietnam. Secondly, it has a reputation as a 'strong and brave will' state of pre-emption because of its glorious history of overthrowing and defeating the French, the USA, and China in 1954, 1973, and 1979. Thirdly, Japan and India have excellent and healthy military relations with Vietnam. In 1979, India supported Vietnam at the time of Cambodia's occupation.

It had purchased India's supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles, Brahmos. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed to facilitate frequent defence meetings at the Deputy Minister Level and exchanges with the Japan Self-Defence Force and the Vietnam People's Army patrol boats. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe held a dialogue at the Indian parliament on how India and Japan can assist Vietnam. It will be the first step for 'India-Japan' co-operation, which will be the essential structural mechanism in the coming future.

Vietnam adopted a Sino-centric nature in the early 19th century. (China is dominant in the economic, cultural and political sphere in the Asian region) Having relations with China is essential for Vietnam, as it has multi-level co-operation in several fields. The dispute between Vietnam and China has centred on the Spratly and Paracel Islands, owing to their long coastlines and favourable geographical locations. The maritime regions between Vietnam's coast and the archipelagos are marked by the "nine dotted lines" that delineate the South China Sea. China is a strong contender and the main reason for the strained relations between these two countries in 2009.

Vietnam had made a 'partial submission' to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf to reduce the South China Sea Continental Shelf in the Northern region (Joint Submission UN 1982). Both Vietnam and Malaysia are concentrating on the "Southern Area" of the South China Sea, reiterating their claims against China. In 1992, a decree on territorial Sea and Continuous region was approved by China's National People's Congress, claiming sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. China's strong claim led to conflict with Vietnam as both countries were strong contenders for the two Islands (MOFA 2009). In 1994 and 1996, there were maritime disputes and tensions between Vietnam and China over the "Vanguard Bank" in the Spratly Islands, which is rich in oil and gas. Vietnam was sponsored by a US company, Crestone Energy Corporation, for oil exploration, and China claimed the same region.

In terms of security, Vietnam nurtured strong ties with Japan, the USA and India in recent years to counter the rising China factor. Japan and Vietnam try to make the Indo-Pacific more 'Free, Fair and Open'. Also, the China-US-Vietnam triangle is significant due to the South China Sea and the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' plan. The incident of oil rigs led many Vietnamese experts and intellectuals to ask for the need to ally with other nations to counter China's hostility in the South China Sea. The foreign policymakers of Vietnam initiated the thought of coalition politics.



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For instance: Hoang Anh Tuan (Director General of the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies) acknowledged that Vietnam's domestic defensive potency is not enough to protect its interests in the South China Sea. So, a new idea emerged for survival: Vietnam 'must associate with the power of other countries and seek global support' as it has experience doing nationwide freedom struggles (Lao Dong 2014).

Vietnam's geopolitical tensions have necessitated alliance politics to challenge China. First of all, Vietnam's alliance with Russia led to hostility with China in 1978, which led to bloody boundary con From the 1980s onwards, Vietnam has been able to avoid China's costs. China is an export-oriented country and the second-largest economy on Earth. It was hardly impressive in the clash with Vietnam, which may have hurt its future economy. Vietnam has significantly improved its global status. It has adopted the diplomatic strategy of 'diversification and multilateralisation' under the Doi Moi policy (a Socialist-Oriented market economy). By 1978, Vietnam had political relations with 98 countries. Most of them had been part of the former socialist bloc. Over time, the number increased to 180 countries, including all five permanent members of the Security Council. It became an associate of ASEAN countries and had strategic relationships with 15 powerful countries. The wise strategy of regional and bilateral cooperation highlights the constraints on Chinese aggression; Vietnam has more resources and alternatives to address China's defence and political pressures.

There were several reasons why Vietnam had transformed its strategy. Firstly, to counter aggressive Chinese moves in the future. It constructed an artificial Island in the South China Sea. Secondly, Vietnam is pursuing soft power by allying strategically with other powerful countries, primarily for defence and security purposes. Thirdly, Vietnam has been a junior member of China's strategy. Thus, the politics of coalition emerged in the South China Sea. The most recent alliance-politics strategy involves the Philippines, Japan, the USA, and India in the South China Sea.

#### V. USA: PRESENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The U.S. became a superpower, achieving unchallenged naval supremacy and maritime influence, and Southeast Asia is strategically important. Subsequently, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union was more interested in Eastern Europe. The USA has a naval presence in many Southeast Asian nations and maintains American assets in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, Singapore and Malaysia.

These regions are also grateful to U.S. consumers for boosting the economy and development, as in some export-led growth models. There is a constant inflow and outflow of FDI between Asia and the U.S. Many global economic bonds have been persistently connected to Asia, which has survived in the region for many decades.

U.S. stability is due to jealousy among Asian countries. No Asian country can compete with American military capabilities. Also, all nations are more concerned with economic development than with the use of military resources. It wisely adopted the bandwagon policy, a strong foundation for this region's strategic stability, while forgetting past enmity and unsettled territorial disputes (Ruger 2009).

#### VI. CHINA'S AGGRESSIVE RISE LED TO THE ERUPTIONS OF SYSTEMATIC INSTABILITY.

China is the one country that might balance the USA, which is the world's superpower (McNeil 2019). This challenge to U.S. supremacy escalates disturbances for many different reasons. It is big and has human resource potential. The Chinese economy was about 2/3 of America's. The defence budget is 1/3 of the American defence budget and 3 times Japan's. China is centrally located in Asia and shares coastal borders with Asia's trading nations. China's interest in Asian naval power is inescapable and eternal. It depends on its trade, which is seaborne, concerning energy supply and merchandise. Every Asian country is linked to China in the era of globalisation, so any economic and military growth is welcome.

China is the first country since WWII to compete with the U.S. The most significant advantage was its solid maritime potential along its coastal borders, which affected the interests of the U.S. and other Asian naval powers. Most importantly, since 1990, China has been able to counter America and affect deterrence in Southeast Asia and among East Asian allies. China has cyber-warfare potential and anti-satellite weapons, which damage the profoundly American networked offensive military equipment. China's booming economy actively competes with Asia and America. It is the largest trade partner of Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia, India, and America. Japan depends on China for its continued growth, which means a sustainable economic and security situation.

#### VII. CONCLUSIONS

Vietnam is significant to the world superpowers, the USA and China, and is crucial for economic and geographic reasons, as it is a gateway for Southeast Asia.



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Both countries pursued FDI to develop Vietnam, yet were enemies; the US withdrawal from Vietnam made China dominant in Asia. In Asia, it is vital for Vietnam to maintain good relations with them. However, in recent times, Vietnam has played its cards well by cautiously associating itself with both. It needs the USA to put China's growing influence under check; on the other hand, it needs stronger links with China to realise its economic goals.

China is also an important ideological ally of Vietnam, and China's economic model is attractive to a developing country like Vietnam. However, the US-Vietnam relationship is essential regarding the South China Sea's interests. The massive trade of 5 trillion US\$ happens through this route. The US wants peace in the waters; any disturbance in the region would be detrimental to its interests. Vietnam has maintained good relations with the USA and China to balance its interests, achieve its business goals, and attain prosperity. Vietnam is a communist country but allies with democratic countries for a progressive future. By countering China's dominance in the region, Vietnam drew on the USA's modern technology to balance power in Southeast Asia.

By striking a balance among the powerful countries, much appreciated for creating a peaceful zone and a strong motivation to emerge as a major economic nation, Vietnam stands at the crossroads of strategic and developmental positions.

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