

Chapter 12

Vietnam's Balancing Strategy in the US–China Rivalry in Southeast Asia

Kiet Le Hoang

Can Tho University, Vietnam

Phuc Huu Nguyen

Hue Historical Science Association, Vietnam

Hiep Xuan Tran

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5236-993X>

Dong A University, Vietnam

Binh Tuan Nguyen

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9878-711X>

Hue University of Education, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

The intensifying US-China power competition in the Indo-Pacific region poses significant challenges to regional countries' political and security situations. Vietnam, with its crucial geostrategic position in Southeast Asia and intertwined national interests, employs a balancing foreign policy strategy to navigate relations with these major powers. This paper analyzes the principles and modalities of Vietnam's balancing strategy in the US-China rivalry. Vietnam pursues a flexible and diversified foreign policy, establishing strategic partnerships with both the US and China across various domains while leveraging multilateral frameworks and institutions to promote security cooperation and maintain regional peace and stability. The findings have implications for assessing how Vietnam can effectively implement its

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balancing strategy amidst the complex US-China rivalry dynamics. This is particularly challenging for a small country like Vietnam, given the substantial power asymmetry and vulnerability inherent in such imbalanced relationships.

INTRODUCTION

The intensifying US-China power competition in the Indo-Pacific region poses significant challenges to the political and security landscape of countries in Southeast Asia. This strategic rivalry has compelled regional states, particularly smaller nations, to carefully navigate their foreign policy approaches to maintain autonomy and protect national interests. Vietnam, with its crucial geostrategic position in Southeast Asia, employs a sophisticated balancing foreign policy strategy to manage relations with these major powers.

The fundamental difference in how large and small countries construct their international strategies is aptly described by Professor Zhang Yun (2021):

“The biggest difference in how large and small countries construct their international strategies is that international strategy is oriented by domestic considerations first and then by external considerations. Small countries usually have small land areas and few resources; their economies depend heavily on external factors for survival, and their inherent fragility and relatively simple political structures make them more sensitive to changes in the international system. Domestic factors do not play an important role in their foreign policy choices. Because they face direct strategic pressure from the international system, if domestic factors lead to policy errors, it will threaten their very survival. Since small countries have a very small margin of error, they are very clear about identifying their core interests. This is also why, even in the context of intensifying US-China competition, small countries still clearly manifest their interests in not choosing sides”.

This argument is widely endorsed by international scholars, with small countries today tending to maintain neutrality in the US-China relationship (Grano, 2023). Vietnam’s approach exemplifies this trend, as it pursues a distinct balancing foreign policy strategy. This strategy involves establishing strategic partnerships with both the US and China across various domains such as politics, economics, and defense, driven by diverse motivations and goals. Simultaneously, Vietnam actively engages with regional and international partners through multilateral forums to promote cooperation, address security issues, and build a peaceful, stable, and prosperous region.

Vietnam’s balancing strategy has yielded notable successes in the context of US-China rivalry. The country has become one of the first small nations globally to establish the highest level of diplomatic relations simultaneously with both ma-

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