


Chapter 13

Flexible Yet Resilient: Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy and Maritime Security in the South China Sea Era

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines Vietnam's maritime security strategy in Southeast Asia, analyzing how a middle power navigates complex regional dynamics amid intensifying great-power competition. The study reveals Vietnam's sophisticated “bamboo diplomacy”—a hedging strategy balancing accommodation of China's interests, defense modernization, and strategic partnerships with the US, India, Japan, Australia, and South Korea. Despite lacking an official maritime security definition, Vietnam pursues a three-pronged approach: adherence to UNCLOS and international law, sustained military modernization with significantly increased defense expenditure, and comprehensive strategic partnerships supporting capacity-building and technology transfer. However, structural constraints including power asymmetry with China, substantial economic interdependence, and ASEAN's consensus-based limitations challenge Vietnam's maritime security ambitions while shaping its pragmatic, autonomy-preserving engagement in the contested South China Sea maritime domain.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the domain of global politics, maritime security refers to the safeguarding of seas and oceans within a particular geographical area from threats that could compromise peace, sovereignty, trade, and environmental sustainability. It broadly encompasses the protection of maritime domains against threats to freedom of navigation, national sovereignty, and maritime resources as measures to preserve regional stability. Regional maritime security is increasingly crucial to global trade and development. The threats to maritime security embrace a broad array of challenges, including piracy, illegal fishing, maritime terrorism, trafficking, environmental degradation, interstate territorial disputes, and naval conflicts, which require a combination of legal, cooperative, and human-centered approaches for mitigation. Regional maritime security generally focuses on the collective efforts by a group of states within a defined region to ensure the safety, security, and sustainable use of littoral spaces, involving cooperation, coordination, and diplomatic mechanisms to address shared threats and opportunities in regional waters. The core elements of maritime security consist of sovereignty and jurisdictional integrity, freedom of navigation and safety of sea lanes, protection of marine resources and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), maritime law enforcement, crisis management, and conflict prevention (Till, 2009, p. 10).

In Southeast Asia, maritime security serves as an essential foundation for peace, prosperity, sustainable development, and progress. Given the region's economic dependence on maritime trade, the prevalence of unresolved maritime disputes, and the growing influence of external powers in its waters, ensuring maritime security constitutes both a regional and international priority. These dimensions are deeply interwoven due to the region's unique maritime geography and complex political landscape. Over recent decades, this region has become a center of power struggle among multiple actors, including Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, further evolving as a flashpoint of strategic rivalry between the United States (US) and China, as well as among member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2009, China published a map depicting the controversial "Nine-Dash Line" to the United Nations (UN), projecting its territorial claims in the South China Sea (referred to as the East Sea in Vietnam) and subsequently adopted an increasingly assertive posture regarding its claims in the region. Since China's claims overlap with the EEZs of several Southeast Asian countries, the issue has generated territorial, legal, and security disputes. For Southeast Asia, maritime security encompasses not merely defending borders but also securing a stable future for the region. Among other factors, the South China Sea dispute remains one of the most contentious issues. The South China Sea constitutes one of the most strategically vital and contested maritime zones due to its richness in

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