

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.113225104

THE ADAPTIVE NATURE IN VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY: VIETNAM'S BAMBOO DIPLOMACY IN THE PROCESS OF INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION

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Received: 27/05/2025
Accepted: 27/08/2025

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the evolution of Viet Nam's foreign policy from the post-unification years (1975–1986) to the current phase of deep integration (2001–present) and advances an operational account of “Bamboo Diplomacy.” Rather than a mere metaphor, Bamboo Diplomacy is theorized here as a small-state strategy that sustains autonomy while widening integration through a calibrated mix of (i) diversified partnerships and multilateralization, (ii) institutional, law-anchored soft-balancing, and (iii) issue-specific hedging each bounded by the invariants of independence, sovereignty, and core national interests. Empirically, we combine close reading of Communist Party of Viet Nam (CPV) doctrine with contemporary scholarship and three standardized case studies U.S. normalization, ASEAN integration, and the South China Sea—to map instrument choice across three phases: ideological alignment (1975–1986), Đổi Mới reform and opening (1986–2001), and rule-embedded integration (2001–present). The analysis yields testable propositions: intensifying great-power rivalry correlates with partnership upgrades and denser legal-institutional commitments; rising maritime risk elevates legal-multilateral tools over bilateral instruments; and increases in trade/technology concentration trigger diversification via overlapping FTAs and sectoral roadmaps. Conceptually, we distinguish Bamboo Diplomacy from hedging and soft-balancing by goals, triggers, and toolkits, and translate the concept into observable indicators that permit falsification. Policy implications travel beyond Viet Nam: Southeast Asian small states can preserve strategic autonomy while deepening integration by layering rule-embedded partnerships, centering international law in dispute management, and hedging selectively without alliance entanglements.

KEYWORDS: Bamboo Diplomacy, Nationalism, State Identity, Multilateralism, Diplomatic Strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since national reunification in 1975, Vietnam's foreign policy has undergone profound transformation: from a trajectory tightly bound to the socialist camp to a flexible, open, and multi-layered approach in which economic renovation goes hand in hand with multilateralization and diversification of relations. The decisive turning point came with the 1986 *Đổi Mới* reforms a policy choice that both broke through isolation and opened the way to economic integration, laying the groundwork for normalization with the United States, accession to ASEAN, and a subsequent series of international agreements and institutions. World Bank development assessments indicate that these reforms are associated with long-term growth and a marked improvement in living standards, thereby strengthening Vietnam's regional and global standing. At the same time, at the National Foreign Affairs Conference (December 14, 2021), General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng introduced the concept of "bamboo diplomacy" as a synthesis and emblem of a diplomacy that is principled yet flexible in method and adaptive amid volatility. (House, 2023; News, 2021; VNA, 2021)

Even so, the existing literature contains two major gaps. First, the post-1975 period is often reduced to

an era of "pure ideology," overlooking early albeit limited—signals of diversification, especially contacts aimed at normalization with the United States as early as 1977 under President Carter (FRUS records and CRS files point to channels of correspondence, special delegations, and proposals for a negotiating framework). Second, the role of historical-national identity in shaping foreign-policy choices remains insufficiently explored, even though many studies of Vietnam in the *Đổi Mới* era show a close link between performance legitimacy, the need for autonomy, and the way Vietnam balances major-power relations. (Cường, 2015; Hiep & Tsvetov, 2018; Historian, 1977; Manyin, 2005).

This article traces Vietnam's foreign-policy trajectory across three stages: (i) the post-unification phase (1975–1986), marked by a priority on ideological alliances but international isolation; (ii) the *Đổi Mới* phase (1986–2001), when Vietnam pivoted to opening, codified commitments, and "returned" to the region—with milestones including Vietnam–U.S. normalization (1995), accession to ASEAN (July 28, 1995), and later the WTO (January 11, 2007); and (iii) deep integration (2001–present), reflected in active participation and contributions to multilateral fora and in upgraded partnership frameworks with major powers. (IMF, 2007; D. o. State, 2024) See more in Figure 1.

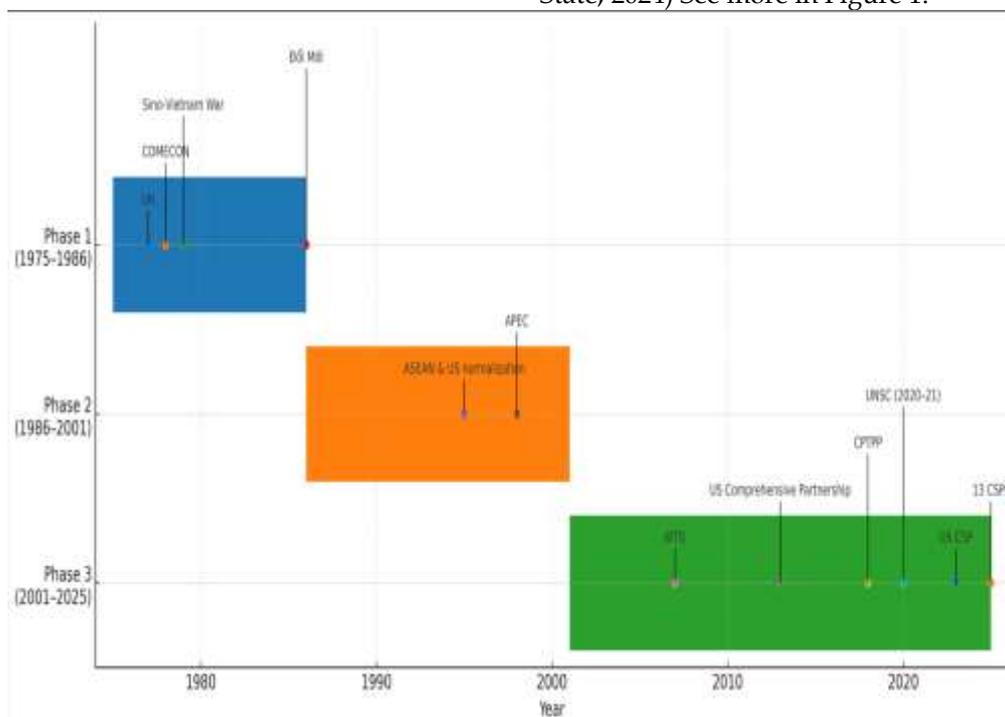


Figure 1: Vietnam's Foreign Policy Timeline (1975–2025).

The analytical focus is "bamboo diplomacy" not merely as a metaphor but as a strategy with clear

objectives, a defined toolkit, and identifiable activation conditions. We define it as a small-

/medium-state strategy that simultaneously maintains autonomy and increases the level of integration. The strategy combines three layers of behavior: (1) diversification and multilateralization to disperse dependence risk; (2) institutional soft-balancing grounded in international law and regional norms (UNCLOS 1982, the ASEAN Charter) to lock in expectations and reinforce institutional constraints; and (3) tactical hedging calibrated by issue/sector, yet always bounded by the invariants of independence, sovereignty, and core national interests.

This approach is visibly distinct from pure “hedging” or pure “soft balancing” in its ultimate objective (autonomy plus deep integration), the density and level of legal-institutional commitments, and the way instruments are combined under conditions of great-power competition. (ASEAN, 2015; Hiep, 2013; Nations, 1982) See more in Table 1.

Recent empirical indicators suggest the concept’s testability. Amid intensifying U.S.–China rivalry, Vietnam has sequentially upgraded high-level partnership frameworks in a manner that “locks in” cooperation institutionally without entering defense alliances: most notably, the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with the United States (9–2023), followed by elevation with Thailand (5–2025); international media have noted this trend as bamboo diplomacy moving into substantive higher gear.

In parallel runs a suite of “multi-layered, high-standard” FTAs that expand strategic room and reduce concentration risks in markets and technology: EVFTA (in force August 1, 2020), CPTPP (in force for Vietnam January 14, 2019), RCEP (January 1, 2022), and UKVFTA (provisional January 1, 2021; in force May 1, 2021). (Manyin, 2005; Reuters, 2024b; D. o. State, 2024)

Building on this conceptual frame, the article poses two research questions and three testable propositions. The first question clarifies the conceptual boundary among bamboo diplomacy, hedging, and soft balancing in terms of goals, instruments, and activation conditions—turning metaphor into an operational concept open to falsification.

The second examines how U.S.–China competition shifts Vietnam’s “instrument mix” (multilateralization, legalization, partnership upgrading) and with what consequences for strategic autonomy and the depth of integration. From there, three propositions follow: (P1) the sharper the great-power rivalry, the higher the probability of

partnership upgrading and institutional densification (as reflected in the 2023–2025 CSP rounds); (P2) rising maritime risk elevates the salience of legal-multilateral tools (UNCLOS language, freedom of navigation/overflight in AMM/ADMM-Plus statements); and (P3) when trade-technology dependence crosses a policy threshold, diversification is activated (sequenced FTAs, roadmaps for new supply-chain and technology cooperation). (ASEAN, 2023; Law, 2023; D. o. State, 2024)

The article contributes in three ways. Conceptually, it “opens the black box” of bamboo diplomacy as a small-to-medium-state strategy that combines the three behaviors above, bounded by the invariants of independence, sovereignty, and core interests, while constructing a comparison framework with hedging and soft balancing to enable measurement and falsification.

Theoretically, it links structure-behavior-outcomes via propositions P1–P3, dialoguing with realism (small-state balancing), liberal institutionalism (legal-organizational lock-in), and constructivism (state identity). Empirically, it standardizes three case studies—Vietnam–U.S. normalization and the CSP upgrade; ASEAN integration; and management of South China Sea risks—under a “context → instruments → outcomes → indicators” template, with selective comparative checks against several ASEAN neighbors to highlight Vietnam-specific distinctions. Evidence includes party-state documents, joint statements/treaties/agreements, scholarly and policy materials, and reliable secondary data; priority citations are drawn from official United Nations/ASEAN/government sources and international organizations.

In sum, “bamboo diplomacy” here is not a vivid turn of phrase but a measurable analytical framework: the objective is to safeguard autonomy while deepening integration; the instruments are diversification–multilateralization, legal–institutional lock-in, and calibrated hedging; and the activation conditions are the intensity of great-power competition, sector-specific risks (especially maritime), and signals of over-dependence. Vietnam’s partnership upgrades and next-generation FTAs over the past decade provide rich empirical ground to test these propositions, contributing a Vietnam case—an instance of “autonomy through integration”—to broader debates on small-state diplomacy in a multipolar era. (Parameswaran, 2024; Reuters, 2024b; Roctus, 2024).

Table 1: Concise comparison: Bamboo Diplomacy ↔ Hedging ↔ Soft-balancing.

Aspect	Bamboo Diplomacy	Hedging	Soft-balancing
Ultimate objective	Safeguard autonomy while deepening integration	Mitigate risk under uncertainty; avoid costly misalignment	Restrain/constrain great powers without forming defense alliances
Primary instruments	(A) Diversification & multilateralization; (B) Institutionalization/legalization (UNCLOS, ASEAN); (C) Controlled hedging	Selective, issue/sector-based cooperation portfolio; multi-homing across markets and technologies	Loose coalitions, institutions, norms; multilateral fora; international law
Typical activation conditions	Great-power rivalry ↑; sectoral risks – especially maritime – ↑; signals of over-dependence ↑	High uncertainty about a great power's intentions/capabilities; high switching costs	Large power asymmetries; prohibitive costs of hard balancing
Mode of commitment	Institutional lock-in (Strategic/CSP upgrades, FTAs, implementation roadmaps); no formal military alliances	Flexible, potentially reversible commitments as signals change	Normative-institutional constraints that raise the costs of coercive behavior
Vietnam indicators	Sequence of CSP upgrades (U.S. 2023, Japan 2023, Australia 2024, Singapore 2025, Thailand 2025); multi-layer FTAs (CPTPP, EVFTA, RCEP, UKVFTA); UNCLOS/ASEAN language in joint statements	Parallel technology/supply-chain cooperation with multiple partners; sector-tailored moves (energy, digital, semiconductors)	

2. RESULTS

2.1. Crisis Needs Solution

Between 1975 and 1985, Vietnam's foreign policy was largely influenced by the ideological tensions of the Cold War and the global struggle between socialist and capitalist systems. During this period, the Communist Party of Vietnam focused on strengthening ties with other socialist nations and advancing Marxism-Leninism. This strategic focus is clearly reflected in the resolutions of the CPV's Fourth and Fifth Congresses, which emphasized the importance of solidarity and cooperation with other communist countries to promote socialist internationalism (Đảng, 1977, 1982). However, this ideological alignment also placed Vietnam in a precarious position, leading to increasing international isolation and severe economic difficulties.

Vietnam's foreign policy at this time was intended to align with both national interests and international commitments, such as participating in the global ideological battle between socialism and capitalism, which was described as the "who wins who" dilemma (Đảng, 1977). A prominent expression of this policy was Vietnam's military intervention in Cambodia, aimed at toppling the Pol Pot regime. While the intervention sought to stabilize the region,

it faced substantial opposition from ASEAN countries, China, and the United States, further isolating Vietnam internationally (Phạm Quang Minh, 2012). This period, marked by conflicts along Vietnam's northern and western borders and compounded by an economic crisis, represented one of the most challenging times in the nation's modern history.

From 1976 to 1985, Vietnam grappled with a deep socio-economic crisis, characterized by stagnation, high inflation, and a heavy reliance on foreign aid. The country's GDP grew by only 50.5% over the decade, with an average annual growth rate of just 4.6%. National income rose by 38.8%, translating to an average increase of 3.7% annually. Hyperinflation surged to an astonishing 774.7% in 1986, while the economy remained highly dependent on external support, particularly from the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). This dependence limited Vietnam's capacity for internal economic development and self-sufficiency (Dinh, 1993). Moreover, defense expenditures added to the financial burden as resources were diverted to support the Politburo's strategy of countering potential threats from China, further exacerbating the national economic situation (Path, 2020).

The socio-political landscape in Vietnam during this time mirrored the decline seen across many socialist nations. A bureaucratic governance model

contributed to economic inefficiency, widespread poverty, and a general sense of apathy, reflecting systemic failures within the communist bloc (Vonyó & Klein, 2017). These challenges highlighted the urgent need for a re-evaluation of both domestic and foreign policies to address the deepening economic crisis and growing international isolation.

By the early 1980s, Vietnam began to recognize the necessity of strategic reforms. Globally, countries were transitioning from confrontation to cooperation, driven by a new emphasis on diplomatic engagement and economic growth. In the early 1970s, shifts in U.S. policies towards the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe reflected a new political approach that connected economic interests with political influence (Path, 2020). These global changes underscored the importance of external cooperation and economic revitalization for Vietnam's future development.

Domestically, the CPV acknowledged the urgent need for reform to better mobilize national resources. The Sixth Congress of the CPV, held in December 1986, marked a pivotal moment, introducing significant shifts in Vietnam's foreign policy. The Congress resolution stressed the importance of integrating national strength with global opportunities, fostering cooperation with countries across diverse socio-economic systems, and prioritizing economic modernization and technological progress (Đảng, 1987). External economic relations were redefined as a crucial aspect of foreign policy, with an emphasis on stabilizing the national economy and accelerating development.

Despite the progress initiated by the Sixth Congress, Vietnam continued to face significant challenges. The ongoing conflict in Cambodia, U.S. sanctions, and strained relations with China over territorial disputes in the South China Sea (Spratly and Paracel Islands) remained formidable obstacles. Additionally, resistance from anti-socialist forces further complicated Vietnam's reform efforts. These challenges highlighted the need for innovative foreign policy strategies to overcome international isolation and achieve national development (Tuan et al., 2020).

The post-1986 reforms proved to be transformative, significantly improving Vietnam's international standing. By 1995, Vietnam had established diplomatic relations with 163 countries, a dramatic increase from just 23 in 1985 (Chapman, 2017; Thayer, 2016). As of today, Vietnam maintains diplomatic relations with 189 out of 193 United Nations member countries and engages in trade and economic cooperation with nearly 230 countries and

territories (Nguyễn Anh Cường & Thành, 2020). This transformation reflects the CPV's ability to adapt its foreign policy, balancing ideological commitments with pragmatic approaches to global realities.

2.2. Peaceful Coexistence: A Strategic Shift in Vietnam's Foreign Policy

The adoption of the Thirteenth Resolution by the Politburo of the 6th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in May 1988 marked a crucial turning point in Vietnam's foreign policy. This resolution introduced the principle of "peaceful coexistence," representing a departure from previous policies centered on conflict. Instead, it advocated for a balanced approach that combined elements of both conflict and cooperation with international partners. Resolution 13 rejected rigid categorizations of nations as either allies or adversaries, focusing instead on fostering political stability, prioritizing economic development, and safeguarding national independence (Học viện Ngoại giao, 2009). This shift laid the foundation for a more diversified and multilateral foreign policy, aligning Vietnam's strategic goals with global realities.

Resolution 13 emerged in response to the evolving geopolitical landscape of the late 1980s. Vietnam's earlier steps toward reform were outlined in Resolution 32 of 1986, which emphasized the need for favorable conditions for economic development and the importance of peaceful relations with major powers such as China, the United States, and ASEAN countries (Elliott, 2012; Hiep Le Hong, 2013). However, while Resolution 32 concentrated primarily on economic cooperation, Resolution 13 articulated a broader diplomatic vision of peaceful coexistence in international relations.

The core idea of Resolution 13 was a diplomatic paradigm shift: to proactively transition from a state of conflict to one where both cooperation and conflict coexisted in a peaceful manner. This approach encouraged Vietnam to reassess its international relationships, moving beyond rigid ideological alliances to form partnerships based on mutual benefit and pragmatic interests. Resolution 13 underscored the necessity of diplomatic flexibility, which would later influence Vietnam's evolving foreign policy strategy (Hiep Le Hong, 2013; Thayer, 2016).

A key feature of the resolution was its integration of economic development into Vietnam's foreign policy. It recognized that a robust economy, bolstered by a strong national defense and international collaboration, would enhance

Vietnam's ability to protect its independence and pursue its socialist objectives. This marked a significant evolution in CPV thinking, acknowledging the interdependence between economic growth and international cooperation as vital components of national strategy (Vũ Quang Vinh, 2000).

Resolution 13 provided Vietnam with the tools to adapt to the dramatic shifts in the global political landscape. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the decline of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, challenges that affected socialist-oriented nations worldwide. Countries like Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia transitioned to more democratic systems, while others faced political fragmentation and social upheaval (Path, 2020). In this context, Vietnam needed to redefine its foreign policy to adjust to new international dynamics, while preserving its sovereignty and socialist ideals.

Domestically, Resolution 13 was also a strategic response to Vietnam's ongoing socio-economic difficulties. The resolution emphasized the importance of leveraging international cooperation to accelerate economic recovery, modernize industries, and overcome the limitations of the state-controlled economy. By cultivating relations with diverse international partners, Vietnam aimed to mitigate the adverse effects of its geopolitical isolation and enhance its role in both regional and global affairs (Path, 2020).

The principles set forth in Resolution 13 were further institutionalized during the 7th CPV Congress in 1991. At this congress, the CPV officially adopted the policy of establishing equal, mutually beneficial partnerships with all nations, regardless of their socio-political systems, based on the principles of peaceful coexistence. This vision positioned Vietnam as a peaceful and cooperative member of the international community, committed to peace, independence, and progress (Đảng, 1991).

2.3. Key policies from the 7th Congress included:

For Laos and Cambodia: Advocating impartial and efficient cooperation, respecting sovereignty, and supporting a comprehensive political solution to the Cambodian issue in line with the UN Charter. For China: Promoting the normalization of relations and addressing bilateral issues through negotiations. For ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific: Building friendly relations to foster regional peace and cooperation. For the United States: Advancing the normalization of relations, culminating in the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1995 (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam,

2007, pp. 118-119).

Resolution 13 and the policies from the 7th CPV Congress fundamentally transformed Vietnam's foreign relations. These strategies allowed Vietnam to resolve the Cambodian conflict, normalize relations with China, and join ASEAN in 1995. By the early 2000s, Vietnam had established diplomatic relations with 189 of the 193 United Nations member states and engaged in economic partnerships with nearly 230 countries and territories, reflecting the success of its peaceful coexistence strategy (Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng, 2006; Phạm Quang Minh & Hải, 2021).

The Thirteenth Resolution marks a transformative moment in Vietnam's foreign policy. By institutionalizing the principle of peaceful coexistence, it offered a framework for navigating the complexities of the post-Cold War era. The resolution's emphasis on economic development, international cooperation, and diplomatic flexibility has not only advanced Vietnam's national interests but also enhanced its global standing. As Vietnam continues to navigate an evolving international landscape, the legacy of Resolution 13 underscores the enduring importance of peaceful coexistence as a fundamental principle of its foreign policy.

2.4. Diversification and Multilateralization: Vietnam's Strategic Foreign Policy Shift

The policy of "diversification and multilateralization" has become a cornerstone of Vietnam's contemporary foreign policy. This shift marks a significant transition from ideological alignment to pragmatic global engagement. Initially, the concept of diversification and multilateralization was not explicitly outlined as a foreign policy but rather reflected broader global trends, as outlined in the Resolution of the Third Central Conference in 1992 (Ban Đối ngoại Trung ương, 1992). Over time, this direction gained formal recognition and was strengthened through the Communist Party of Vietnam's VII Congress, which placed an emphasis on economic cooperation and building partnerships with nations across diverse socio-political systems (Thayer, 2016; Vietnam, 1991). By the mid-1990s, this policy became central to Vietnam's diplomatic strategy, particularly after the 7th Mid-term Conference in 1994 and the VIII Congress in 1996. These milestones established diversification and multilateralization as the core of Vietnam's foreign policy, aiming to foster peace, independence, and self-reliance, while simultaneously expanding international partnerships (Đảng, 1996).

The VIII Congress (1996) outlined several comprehensive objectives as part of the

diversification and multilateralization strategy. These goals focused on enhancing Vietnam's international engagement in various forms:

Strengthening bilateral ties with neighboring countries.

Prioritizing relations with developed nations and global economic-political hubs.

Expanding political partnerships, including connections with ruling political parties.

Enhancing engagement with non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Increasing participation in global frameworks such as APEC, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the United Nations.

These objectives were designed to attract foreign investment, broaden international cooperation, and encourage active participation in global forums to address emerging challenges (Đặng, 1996). This multifaceted approach acknowledged the interconnectedness between economic progress, diplomatic engagement, and national security.

Vietnam's commitment to diversification and multilateralization has yielded numerous diplomatic and economic successes:

Trade and Bilateral Relations: In 1996, Vietnam initiated negotiations with the United States that culminated in the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) in 2001. This agreement played a pivotal role in the normalization of relations and Vietnam's deeper integration into the global economy.

Regional and Global Integration: Vietnam became a founding member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 and joined APEC in 1998. Vietnam has also participated in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) since 1996 and the Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) since 1999. Furthermore, its election to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and its leadership in various UN bodies, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and UNICEF, further underscore Vietnam's growing global presence (Đỗ Thùy Dương, 2017).

Leadership in Multilateral Forums: Vietnam has hosted significant international events, including the ASEM Summit (2004), APEC Summit (2006, 2017), and the ASEAN-US-North Korea Summit (2019). Its election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in two terms (2008-2009, 2020-2021) and its contributions to UN peacekeeping missions highlight Vietnam's proactive engagement in multilateral diplomacy (Bùi Thanh Sơn, 2021).

Party and Parliamentary Diplomacy: Vietnam has cultivated diplomatic relations with 247 political

parties across 111 countries and maintains connections with over 140 national parliaments. These partnerships have strengthened Vietnam's influence in international parliamentary forums and broadened its political, economic, and cultural exchanges (Nguyễn Phú Trọng, 2021).

The implementation of diversification and multilateralization has significantly raised Vietnam's global profile, facilitating its integration into the international community. This shift has enabled Vietnam to balance its relationships with major powers while safeguarding its national interests. Vietnam's leadership within ASEAN and its contributions to regional stability further highlight its central role in Southeast Asia. Additionally, Vietnam's proactive participation in global organizations has improved its ability to address pressing global challenges collaboratively.

The success of Vietnam's diversification and multilateralization policy demonstrates the effectiveness of its foreign policy transformation. By adopting this approach, Vietnam has positioned itself as a reliable and responsible global partner. This strategy has not only bolstered Vietnam's economic and diplomatic resilience but also ensured that the country remains adaptable in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing international environment (Hiep Le Hong, 2013; Le Hong Hiep, 2015).

The policy of diversification and multilateralization has been instrumental in reshaping Vietnam's foreign policy approach. Moving away from strict ideological alignment, this policy has embraced a pragmatic and inclusive diplomatic strategy, focused on fostering diverse international partnerships and engaging in multilateral initiatives. The transformation has been pivotal for advancing Vietnam's economic development and strengthening its position as a proactive global player. By embracing these diplomatic strategies, Vietnam has effectively navigated the complexities of globalization, ensuring continued national growth and deeper international integration.

2.5. Partners and Opponents: Strategic Foundations of Vietnam's Foreign Policy

In the evolving geopolitical landscape of the post-Cold War era, the Communist Party of Vietnam has demonstrated considerable adaptability and strategic foresight in defining its approach to foreign relations. The policy of distinguishing "partners" from "opponents" is a fundamental innovation in Vietnam's foreign policy. Rooted in the principle of

"more friends, fewer enemies," this pragmatic and flexible strategy has allowed Vietnam to navigate complex global dynamics while safeguarding its sovereignty and advancing national interests.

The post-9/11 era marked a significant shift in global security dynamics, with the United States launching a unilateral "global war on terrorism" that further polarized the international community. At the same time, regional efforts, such as the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) between ASEAN and China, sought to mitigate tensions and establish multilateral security frameworks (Cường & Thành, 2018). These global and regional developments highlighted the growing need for small and medium-sized nations, including Vietnam, to adopt strategic and adaptable foreign policies to effectively navigate the competing influences of major powers such as the United States and China (Tuan et al., 2020).

In response to these challenges, the CPV issued the "Strategy to Defend the Fatherland in the New Situation" during its 8th Plenary Session in 2003. This landmark resolution introduced the concept of "partners" and "opponents" in international relations, marking a pivotal shift in Vietnam's foreign policy. The resolution emphasized the importance of identifying allies and adversaries based on their alignment with Vietnam's goals of national construction and defense (Đảng, 2003).

The 2003 resolution articulated a clear principle: "Those who respect Vietnam's independence, sovereignty, and seek cooperative and mutually beneficial relations are our partners; those who oppose our national goals are our opponents" (Đảng, 2003). This distinction allowed Vietnam to move away from rigid ideological alliances, adopting a more pragmatic, interest-driven approach to foreign relations. For the first time, the CPV acknowledged that partners and opponents could coexist within the same international actors, depending on the context and evolving circumstances (Phạm Quang Minh & Hải, 2021).

This policy shift emphasized the importance of engaging with global powers, such as the United States, to promote mutual understanding and cooperation, while also countering extremist tendencies within these relationships. Simultaneously, Vietnam prioritized strengthening its ties with industrialized nations like Japan and the European Union, and building strategic partnerships with Russia and India, with a focus on economic, security, and defense cooperation (Chapman, 2017).

Vietnam's foreign policy implementation has been characterized by its ability to manage complex

and sometimes contradictory relationships, demonstrating remarkable flexibility. Several key strategies illustrate this approach:

High-Priority Partnerships: Vietnam has sought to establish strategic and comprehensive partnerships with key global actors. By 2024, Vietnam aimed to maintain 30 such partnerships, including with China, Russia, the United States, Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia (Nguyễn Việt Thảo, 2021).

Strategic Diversification: Vietnam has actively engaged with regional and global organizations such as ASEAN, the United Nations, APEC, and ASEM. Its relationships extend beyond mere economic cooperation, encompassing political, security, and cultural exchanges to ensure balanced and sustainable development (Nguyễn Anh Cường & Thành, 2020).

Economic Focus: Recognizing the significance of economic interdependence, Vietnam has prioritized access to capital, technology, and markets from advanced nations. This strategic focus supports its goals of industrialization and modernization, while promoting interdependence to reduce the risks of confrontation or dependency (Chapman, 2017; Tuan et al., 2020).

Vietnam's foreign policy approach has produced significant diplomatic and economic achievements:

Strategic Partnerships: Vietnam has forged comprehensive strategic partnerships with global powers such as China, Russia, the United States, Japan, and India. These relationships are grounded in principles of equality, mutual benefit, and non-interference, creating a network of interdependent ties (Phạm Quang Minh & Hải, 2021).

Regional Integration: Vietnam's active participation in ASEAN, as well as its involvement in multilateral trade agreements like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), underscores its commitment to regional stability and economic growth (Nguyễn Hoàng Giáp et al., 2007).

Proactive Diplomacy: Vietnam has significantly enhanced its global standing through leadership roles in international organizations. Notable achievements include its non-permanent membership on the UN Security Council (2008-2009, 2020-2021) and its participation in peacekeeping operations, which have strengthened its soft power (Chapman, 2017; Phạm Quang Minh & Hải, 2021).

Flexibility in Relationships: The CPV has recognized that even partners may have conflicting interests, while some opponents may present

opportunities for engagement. This pragmatic approach has enabled Vietnam to adapt to changing geopolitical dynamics, ensuring its long-term stability and growth (Đảng, 2003; Hoàng Xuân Lâm, 2013).

Despite its successes, Vietnam continues to face challenges, particularly in managing relations with major powers amid rising tensions in the South China Sea and the growing strategic competition between the United States and China. To sustain its progress, Vietnam must continue to leverage its position within multilateral frameworks, balance its economic and security priorities, and uphold its policy of "cooperation and struggle."

Looking forward, Vietnam's foreign policy will likely focus on:

Deepening partnerships with emerging powers to diversify its strategic options.

Strengthening ASEAN's centrality in regional security to mitigate external pressures.

Enhancing economic competitiveness to maximize the benefits of globalization while safeguarding national interests.

Vietnam's innovative policy of distinguishing between partners and opponents represents a nuanced and pragmatic response to the complexities of modern international relations. By cultivating strategic partnerships while managing adversarial relationships with flexibility, Vietnam has enhanced its global stature, preserved its sovereignty, and achieved significant economic and political gains. This balanced and adaptive approach highlights Vietnam's role as a proactive and responsible member of the international community and provides valuable lessons for small and medium-sized nations navigating an increasingly polarized global environment.

2.6. Prospects for a Breakthrough: Comprehensive Diplomacy and the Emergence of Vietnam's "Bamboo Diplomacy"

The 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), held in January 2021, marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of Vietnam's foreign policy. Building on the successes of 35 years of renovation (Đổi Mới), the Congress introduced a forward-looking vision for diplomacy. Central to this vision were commitments to "independence, self-reliance, multilateralization, and diversification; proactive international integration that is comprehensive, extensive, and effective; maintaining a peaceful and stable environment while continuously enhancing Vietnam's international position and prestige" (Đảng, 2021, pp. 117-118). This

vision marked the beginning of a new phase in Vietnam's foreign affairs, founded on resilience, adaptability, and strategic foresight.

The 13th Congress reaffirmed Vietnam's dedication to proactive and dynamic international integration, a policy that traces its roots back to the 8th Plenary Session of the 8th Central Committee in December 1998. At that time, the CPV called for "independence, self-sufficiency, diversification, and multilateral engagement, with a focus on regional and global economic integration" (Bộ Ngoại giao, 2008, p. 26). This approach evolved over the following years:

10th Congress (2006): Expanded integration to include both economic and non-economic sectors (Đảng, 2006, p. 112).

11th Congress (2011): Advocated for a more comprehensive integration across all domains, beyond just economics (Đảng, 2011, pp. 235-236).

12th Congress (2016): Focused on deepening economic integration while encouraging complementary forms of integration (Đảng, 2016, p. 155).

By the 13th Congress, Vietnam's growing global influence prompted a shift towards a holistic, strategic approach. Integration was no longer confined to economics but extended to active participation in global governance, politics, culture, science, and technology. This broad integration reflects Vietnam's awareness of the interconnectedness of global challenges and its ambition to play a proactive role in addressing them.

The 13th Congress also saw the emergence of a distinctive diplomatic philosophy known as "bamboo diplomacy." Rooted in both flexibility and resilience, this approach encapsulates key elements of Vietnam's diplomatic strategy:

Flexibility and Resilience: Bamboo diplomacy is inspired by the resilience of bamboo—soft yet unyielding. It combines adaptability and creativity with firm determination to protect national sovereignty and interests (Nguyễn Phú Trọng, 2021; Thái Văn Long, 2022).

Cultural and Ideological Foundations: Drawing from Vietnam's historical traditions, Ho Chi Minh's ideology, and Marxism-Leninism, bamboo diplomacy integrates global progressive ideas while maintaining a steadfast commitment to the values of independence, freedom, and the well-being of the Vietnamese people (Trần Chí Trung, 2022).

Strategic Pragmatism: Vietnam's diplomacy emphasizes the ability to balance advancing or retreating when necessary. The approach involves forging flexible but firm connections that build

enduring alliances, as seen in Vietnam's management of relationships with global powers while fostering regional cooperation (Nguyễn Như Lôi, 2022).

Bamboo diplomacy reflects Vietnam's skill in navigating complex international dynamics. By leveraging its cultural traditions, history, and strategic vision, Vietnam is able to address challenges and create opportunities for growth.

Vietnam's achievements under comprehensive integration and bamboo diplomacy suggest promising prospects for the future:

Enhanced Global Standing: Vietnam's increased involvement in multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations and ASEAN, and its leadership in global initiatives have strengthened its international reputation. Vietnam's active role in addressing global challenges, such as climate change and regional security, underscores its growing influence (Đặng, 2021).

Economic and Strategic Partnerships: Vietnam continues to strengthen its relationships with key global players through trade agreements, strategic alliances, and its participation in frameworks such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). These efforts are vital for ensuring sustainable economic growth and enhancing national security (Nguyễn Như Lôi, 2022).

Regional Leadership: As a core member of ASEAN, Vietnam plays a central role in regional security and economic cooperation. Its diplomatic efforts to mediate disputes, such as those in the South China Sea, demonstrate its ability to foster stability and collaboration in a region marked by volatility (Thái Văn Long, 2022).

Despite its successes, Vietnam faces several key challenges:

Geopolitical Tensions: Managing the competing influences of global powers, particularly the United States and China, requires a delicate balance and skilled diplomacy.

Sustainable Development: Ensuring that economic growth is inclusive and environmentally sustainable remains a critical priority.

Global Integration: As Vietnam deepens its engagement with the global community, addressing domestic structural issues will be crucial to maximizing the benefits of globalization (Kimura, 2023; Velasquez, 2025).

To navigate these challenges, Vietnam's foreign policy will need to:

Continue leveraging bamboo diplomacy to balance relationships with major powers while safeguarding national interests.

Strengthen multilateral frameworks to promote

regional stability and collective action on global issues. Invest in domestic capacity-building to enhance competitiveness in an increasingly interconnected world (Hoang, 2025; Roctus, 2024). The 13th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam reaffirmed the country's commitment to proactive, comprehensive, and effective diplomacy. Through the concept of bamboo diplomacy, Vietnam has developed a foreign policy that is flexible yet resilient, innovative yet grounded in its cultural and ideological heritage. This approach positions Vietnam as a dynamic and responsible global actor, capable of navigating the complexities of the modern world while advancing its national interests. As Vietnam builds on its successes, the prospects for a breakthrough in its diplomatic endeavors remain promising, underpinned by the enduring principles of independence, self-reliance, and creative adaptation.

3. DISCUSSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Since the initiation of the *Đổi Mới* reforms in 1986, Vietnam's foreign policy has been instrumental in driving economic growth and fostering deeper international integration. The country's transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market, supported by an open-door foreign policy, has yielded remarkable results. This section examines the interplay between Vietnam's foreign policy strategies, economic achievements, and international integration, emphasizing the role of diversification, multilateralism, and "Bamboo Diplomacy." One of the clearest indicators of Vietnam's successful foreign policy is its impressive GDP growth. During the 1980s, Vietnam's average GDP growth rate stood at a modest 4.6%. However, following the *Đổi Mới* reforms, this figure rose substantially, reaching approximately 7% in subsequent decades. Between 2010 and 2020, Vietnam sustained an average annual GDP growth rate of 6.5%, despite global economic uncertainties (Nguyen et al., 2019; tế, 2023). These figures underscore the pivotal role of an adaptive and inclusive foreign policy in creating a stable environment for economic development. Vietnam's export performance has also surged, driven by its proactive participation in global trade networks and free trade agreements. Export turnover increased from \$2.4 billion in 1990 to over \$300 billion by 2022, representing a significant expansion in both volume and market reach (Hoan, 2020; kê, 2023). Agreements such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) have opened new

markets and enhanced Vietnam's competitiveness in the global economy. Vietnam's foreign policy has been equally successful in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). Annual FDI inflows grew from \$1.5 billion in 1990 to over \$20 billion from 2010 onwards, with cumulative FDI surpassing \$400 billion by 2023 (Hoan, 2020; Linh, 2023; Ngo et al., 2020). This influx of investment has spurred the development of processing and manufacturing industries, significantly upgrading domestic production technologies and creating millions of jobs. Notably, Vietnam has established itself as a hub for global supply chains, attracting multinational corporations in sectors such as electronics, textiles, and renewable energy. The stability and openness of Vietnam's political and economic environment, underpinned by its flexible and proactive diplomacy, have reinforced its position as a preferred investment destination. The country's commitment to economic modernization and international cooperation has played a crucial role in maintaining investor confidence, even amidst global challenges. The strategy of "Bamboo Diplomacy" has been central to Vietnam's foreign policy achievements. This approach, characterized by flexibility, resilience, and adaptability, has enabled Vietnam to balance relationships with major powers, such as the United States and China, while pursuing multilateral engagement. By fostering partnerships through ASEAN, APEC, and other international organizations, Vietnam has safeguarded its national interests and enhanced its diplomatic standing (Parameswaran, 2024). The policy of diversification has allowed Vietnam to mitigate risks associated with overdependence on any single partner. Through agreements such as the CPTPP and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Vietnam has strengthened its trade and investment ties across multiple regions, ensuring sustainable economic growth. The following table illustrates Vietnam's economic transformation since 1990, highlighting the role of its foreign policy in driving growth and integration:

Table 2: Vietnam's Economic Transformation (1990–2022) Shaped by Foreign Policy.

Indicator	1990	2010	2022
Average annual GDP growth	4.6%	6.5%	~7%
Export turnover (USD billion)	2.4	72.2	300+
FDI (USD billion)	1.5	20	>20 per year

These figures reflect the effectiveness of Vietnam's strategic foreign policy in transforming the country

into one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic economies.

Vietnam's foreign policy, characterized by diversification, multilateralism, and "Bamboo Diplomacy," has been a driving force behind its economic transformation. The remarkable growth in GDP, exports, and FDI demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach in fostering development and enhancing Vietnam's global standing. As Vietnam looks to the future, its ability to adapt to changing global dynamics while preserving its core values will remain central to its continued success in international integration.

3.1. Motivations and Drivers of Policy Shift

Vietnam's foreign policy evolution has been shaped by a complex interplay of internal imperatives and external geopolitical dynamics. These factors reflect the country's pragmatic approach to safeguarding national interests, promoting economic growth, and ensuring political stability, particularly in the face of regional and global uncertainties. This section examines the internal and external motivations that have driven Vietnam's foreign policy shifts, emphasizing its adaptability and strategic foresight.

Domestically, the primary drivers of Vietnam's foreign policy adjustments have been the need to secure sustained economic development and maintain political stability. The *Đổi Mới* reforms, initiated in 1986, marked a significant departure from Vietnam's previous focus on ideological alignment with socialist nations. The reforms embraced global economic integration, recognizing the limitations of a centrally planned economy and the necessity for trade liberalization, foreign investment, and market-oriented reforms.

This internal transformation was not only an economic necessity but also a political imperative. By fostering economic growth, the Communist Party of Vietnam sought to strengthen its legitimacy and address the socio-economic challenges stemming from years of conflict and isolation. Trade liberalization and integration into global markets became key mechanisms for the nation's survival and long-term development.

Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007 and its active participation in free trade agreements, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), highlighted its commitment to using foreign policy as a tool for economic modernization. These initiatives were pivotal in Vietnam's transformation from one of the

world's poorest countries to a rapidly developing economy with a growing middle class and diverse industrial base (Revilla Diez, 2016).

Externally, Vietnam's foreign policy has been shaped by its geopolitical realities, particularly the necessity to manage relations with major powers such as China and the United States (Cường, 2023). Vietnam's foreign policy reflects a delicate balancing act, as it seeks strategic autonomy while navigating the opportunities and risks posed by its geographical location in a region characterized by competition and interdependence.

Vietnam's approach to foreign relations is fundamentally rooted in avoiding over-reliance on any single power. To achieve this, the country has pursued a diversification strategy, cultivating comprehensive and strategic partnerships with countries across different regions. Notable examples include partnerships with Japan, India, South Korea, and Australia. These relationships provide economic benefits and serve as counterweights to mitigate potential pressure from China, particularly in the context of territorial disputes in the South China Sea (Lan, 2024; Trần et al., 2024).

Simultaneously, Vietnam's normalization of relations with the United States exemplifies its pragmatic approach toward former adversaries. The signing of the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) in 2001 was a landmark event, paving the way for deeper economic ties and enhanced cooperation. This diplomatic engagement underscores Vietnam's capacity to reconcile historical differences in pursuit of its national interests (Atreides, 2023).

Vietnam's strategic flexibility is also evident in its response to regional security challenges. The South China Sea, a crucial area for international trade and energy resources, remains a focal point of Vietnam's foreign policy. While Vietnam has engaged with China on economic initiatives, it has simultaneously strengthened its defense ties with the United States, Japan, and other regional powers to hedge against potential security threats. This dual approach highlights Vietnam's nuanced understanding of regional dynamics and its firm commitment to safeguarding its sovereignty (Mai et al., 2024).

The concept of "Bamboo Diplomacy" encapsulates Vietnam's flexible and resilient approach to foreign relations. Like bamboo, which bends with the wind but does not break, Vietnam's diplomacy adapts to changing circumstances while preserving its core principles of independence and sovereignty. Bamboo Diplomacy enables Vietnam to strike a delicate balance between cooperation and resistance. For instance, Vietnam has cooperated

with China on joint development projects and trade, but it has also actively opposed China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. Similarly, Vietnam's growing defense cooperation with the United States and its participation in regional security frameworks, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), reflect its strategic hedging against potential security challenges (Diplo, 2025).

This duality is a hallmark of Vietnam's pragmatic foreign policy. Instead of adhering strictly to ideological commitments, Vietnam prioritizes its national interests, capitalizing on opportunities for cooperation while preparing for contingencies. This approach has allowed Vietnam to enhance its global standing, promote economic growth, and strengthen its influence in the region.

Vietnam's ability to balance internal and external drivers has resulted in several tangible achievements:

Economic Resilience: Vietnam's integration into global trade networks has spurred export growth, attracted foreign direct investment (FDI), and facilitated industrial development. The country is now one of Southeast Asia's fastest-growing economies.

Enhanced Strategic Partnerships: Comprehensive relationships with major powers and regional actors have provided Vietnam with the tools to navigate geopolitical complexities while maintaining its independence.

Increased International Standing: Vietnam's leadership roles in ASEAN and active participation in multilateral organizations have elevated its position as a proactive and responsible global actor.

Vietnam's foreign policy shifts reflect a careful balancing act between domestic needs and external pressures. The pursuit of economic growth and political stability, coupled with strategic autonomy and pragmatism in foreign relations, has enabled Vietnam to navigate a complex and dynamic global landscape. By embracing the principles of Bamboo Diplomacy, Vietnam has demonstrated its ability to adapt to changing circumstances while safeguarding its sovereignty and advancing its national interests. This dynamic and pragmatic approach will continue to guide Vietnam's foreign policy as it seeks to build on its successes in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world.

3.2. Challenges and Constraints in Policy Implementation

Vietnam's recent foreign-policy gains are real, but their translation into durable outcomes is conditioned by a set of intertwined constraints that determine when and how Hanoi deploys the

instruments of Bamboo Diplomacy – diversification and multilateralization, law-anchored soft-balancing, and calibrated hedging. The China factor is structurally central: China is simultaneously Vietnam’s largest trading counterpart and a key supplier to export-oriented manufacturing, while maritime disputes over the Paracels and Spratlys remain acute. Official trade and investment reporting underscores this exposure (e.g., General Statistics Office trade records; Ministry of Planning and Investment FDI notes), even as Hanoi has persistently framed the South China Sea through international law and ASEAN mechanisms – prioritizing UNCLOS-consistent claims, freedom of navigation/overflight, and peaceful settlement in ministerial communiqués and defence-track statements (ASEAN, 2015; Nations, 1982). This legal-multilateral orientation is consistent with Vietnam’s 2019 National Defence White Paper, which codifies a principled non-allied posture while expanding defence diplomacy (“four no’s”) and thereby pushes Hanoi to seek “institutional lock-ins” short of alliances (Phong, 2019).

Heterogeneity within ASEAN constitutes a second, persistent constraint: although regional statements repeatedly affirm a rules-based maritime order, member states’ varying threat perceptions and economic ties with China complicate the emergence of a single, durable regional line – hence Vietnam’s dual track of principled legalization and pragmatic coalition-building in ASEAN fora such as the AMM/ADMM-Plus (ASEAN, 2023; Law, 2023). A third constraint is state capacity and coordination at home. Vietnam’s governance model – central strategic direction with decentralized execution – creates space for sub-national initiative yet can produce uneven implementation across provinces and agencies; sustaining high-quality compliance with trade-facilitation and FTA chapter obligations requires tighter horizontal and vertical coordination as volumes and regulatory complexity rise (see, for example, World Bank diagnostics on Vietnam’s public administration and service delivery; Vietnam’s notifications under the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement provide the legal scaffolding for this workstream) (Bank, 2025).

External macro-shocks amplify a fourth constraint: concentration risk in markets, technologies, and logistics. The COVID-19 period exposed how disruptions propagate through textiles, footwear, and electronics supply chains, reinforcing the need to spread exposure across partners and nodes. Vietnam’s overlapping trade agreements – EVFTA (in force 1 Aug 2020), CPTPP (for Vietnam 14

Jan 2019), RCEP (1 Jan 2022), and UKVFTA (1 May 2021) – are designed to widen option value and dilute partner concentration over time (ASEAN, 2022; EU, 2020; Repository, 2018; VNTR, 2021). A fifth, cross-cutting challenge is reputational and value-based friction with Western partners. U.S. and EU materials continue to flag human-rights and political-freedoms concerns that can spill over into legislative ratification cycles and negotiations; Hanoi typically emphasizes sovereignty and non-interference, a stance consistent with doctrine but one that requires careful diplomatic management to avoid collateral effects on economic and technology cooperation (FIDH, 2025; U. S. D. o. State, 2024).

To keep this analysis evaluable rather than descriptive, we tie each constraint to observable indicators that directly map to Bamboo Diplomacy’s toolkit. Rivalry volatility can be operationalized by the count and timing of partnership upgrades and new dialogue mechanisms, the scope of joint statements (technology, supply chains, climate, maritime security), and the specificity of rule-of-law clauses; Vietnam’s recent comprehensive strategic partnerships (CSPs) provide primary texts for line-by-line coding – United States (11 Sep 2023), Japan (27 Nov 2023), Australia (7 Mar 2024), Singapore (12 Mar 2025) and Thailand (16 May 2025) (Australia, 2024; Japan, 2023; Singapore, 2025). Concentration risk is measurable via partner-share and Herfindahl indices for trade and FDI, paired with FTA milestones from official portals (EVFTA, CPTPP, RCEP, UKVFTA) and national statistics baselines (GSO, MPI). Maritime security pressure is tractable through the incidence and specificity of UNCLOS references and ASEAN-venue usage (ARF/ADMM-Plus, AMM communiqués), alongside legal actions such as extended-shelf submissions to the UN (ASEAN, 2023; Nations, 1982). Institutional capacity and coordination can be proxied by lags from announcement to activation of CSP workplans, progress on customs/SPS-TBT/“single-window” deliverables under FTAs and the WTO TFA, and deployable capability signals – such as Vietnam’s Level-2 field hospitals to UNMISS that accrue reputational capital consistent with a law-centric brand. Finally, information-integrity metrics – the speed and legal density of official clarifications and the density of treaty cross-references in public messaging – reinforce the credibility of soft-balancing in contested narratives.

Assembled into a compact “implementation dashboard” – a partnership-depth index, a legal-salience index, concentration indices, activation/lag metrics for CSP/FTA workstreams, a peacekeeping

profile, and basic communication-integrity measures—these indicators generate clear diagnostics tightly aligned to the paper's propositions: rivalry spikes should precede partnership deepening and denser legal language (P1); maritime incidents should elevate legal-multilateral salience and ASEAN venue use (P2); and rising trade/tech concentration should trigger diversification moves via FTAs and sectoral MoUs (P3). Where patterns deviate, the binding constraint is likely capacity (slow activation), political-economy adjustment (utilization and compliance costs), legal salience (weak invocation of rules), or partnership design (insufficient institutionalization). In this sense, Vietnam's implementation environment is not a black box but a measurable set of pressures—China indispensable yet contentious, ASEAN necessary yet heterogeneous, the global economy opportunity yet shock amplifier—against which Hanoi's preference for law-and-institutional lock-ins over formal alliances remains the coherent path, visible in CSP texts, the FTA web, and the steady juridification of maritime diplomacy.

3.3. *International Reactions to Vietnam's Policy*

Vietnam's foreign policy, marked by pragmatism, flexibility, and multilateral engagement, has garnered positive reactions from the international community. By emphasizing principles such as independence, self-reliance, and proactive integration, Vietnam has positioned itself as a responsible and dynamic actor on the global stage. However, its nuanced approach also presents challenges, requiring careful balancing to manage complex international relationships.

Vietnam's active participation in multilateral organizations underscores its commitment to global cooperation and governance. As a member of ASEAN, the United Nations, and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Vietnam has demonstrated leadership and responsibility in addressing regional and global challenges. Its election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2020–2021 term further highlights the international community's recognition of Vietnam's growing influence and constructive contributions to global peace and security (Anh, 2019).

Within ASEAN, Vietnam has consistently championed regional stability, economic integration, and collective action on shared challenges, including the South China Sea disputes (Trang, 2019). Within the UN, Vietnam's advocacy for multilateralism and

adherence to international law have enhanced its reputation as a cooperative and principled member of the global community (Son & Truong, 2021).

Vietnam's relationship with China remains one of the most challenging aspects of its foreign policy. While the two countries share robust economic ties, territorial disputes in the South China Sea complicate their relationship. Vietnam's sovereignty claims over the Spratly and Paracel Islands frequently put it at odds with China's expansive claims in the region (Reuters, 2024a).

Vietnam has sought to maintain a pragmatic balance between cooperation and resistance in its dealings with China:

Economic Collaboration: China remains one of Vietnam's largest trading partners, and both countries benefit from substantial cross-border trade and investment. Vietnam has leveraged these economic ties to foster growth while preserving its strategic autonomy.

Territorial Defense: On matters related to the South China Sea, Vietnam consistently advocates for peaceful dispute resolution based on international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Vietnam's ability to voice its concerns while maintaining diplomatic dialogue with China highlights its strategic acumen (Thayer, 2017).

This dual strategy allows Vietnam to defend its sovereignty without jeopardizing economic interests, demonstrating its capacity to navigate one of the most complex bilateral relationships in Asia.

4. STRENGTHENING TIES WITH WESTERN PARTNERS

Vietnam's growing strategic alignment with the United States and other Western countries has significantly bolstered its regional and international standing. The normalization of diplomatic relations with the U.S. in 1995, followed by the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) in 2001, marked a pivotal shift in Vietnam's foreign relations (Cường, 2015). Today, Vietnam cooperates with Western powers across multiple sectors, including trade, security, and education.

4.1. *Vietnam's deepening partnerships with Western nations are driven by shared interests, such as:*

Economic Growth: Trade agreements like the CPTPP have opened new markets for Vietnamese exports, strengthening the country's position in global supply chains.

Security Cooperation: Vietnam has expanded its

defense ties with the U.S., Japan, and Australia to counterbalance China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. Joint military exercises and capacity-building initiatives further highlight Vietnam's proactive approach to regional security.

However, these partnerships require careful management to avoid provoking China. Vietnam's "Bamboo Diplomacy"—a flexible yet resilient approach—has allowed the country to maintain a strategic balance, avoiding exclusive alliances that could undermine its principle of non-alignment, while maximizing the benefits of cooperation with diverse partners.

Vietnam's foreign policy has successfully positioned the country as a respected and influential member of the international community. Its pragmatic approach to managing relationships with major powers, proactive engagement in multilateral institutions, and commitment to regional stability have earned widespread recognition. While challenges remain, Vietnam's ability to balance complex relationships and capitalize on opportunities reflects its diplomatic maturity and strategic vision. As Vietnam continues to navigate the evolving global landscape, its emphasis on flexibility, resilience, and cooperation will remain central to its foreign policy success.

4.2. Regional mini-comparison: Thailand and Singapore

Set against two proximate reference cases—Thailand and Singapore—a compact regional comparison helps turn "Bamboo Diplomacy" from metaphor into a falsifiable strategy by showing how starting constraints and institutional choices shape small-state behavior across alliance status, partnership architecture, UN/peacekeeping roles, FTA embedding, and maritime dispute management. Thailand begins as a formal U.S. treaty ally in mainland Southeast Asia, anchored by the 1954 Manila Pact and reinforced by the 1962 Rusk–Thanat communiqué; it has also been designated a Major Non-NATO Ally, which deepens planning, training, and access within the U.S. security ecosystem (see U.S. State Department factsheets and FRUS documentation). (Historian, 1962; State, 2025) Singapore, by contrast, sits inside the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA)—a long-running but explicitly consultative framework with the UK, Australia, Malaysia, and New Zealand that routinizes exercises and interoperability without a NATO-style mutual-defense clause (see MINDEF statements and FPDA governance notes). (MINDEF, 2021) Viet Nam occupies a third position: a

principled non-allied state whose 2019 National Defense White Paper codifies "four no's" (including no military alliances) even as Hanoi expands defence diplomacy (Phùng, 2019) —an initial condition that naturally channels policy toward institutionalized partnerships and legal-multilateral tools rather than alliance entanglements.

Divergence is clearest in the architecture and pace of high-level partnerships. Between September 2023 and May 2025, Viet Nam executed a rapid sequence of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) upgrades—United States (11 September 2023), Japan (27 November 2023), Australia (7 March 2024), France (7 October 2024, followed by a joint declaration on 27 May 2025), Singapore (12 March 2025), and Thailand (16 May 2025). These instruments widen scope (technology, supply chains, climate, maritime security) while avoiding mutual-defence commitments—precisely the "institutional lock-in without alliance" that Bamboo Diplomacy predicts under intensifying great-power rivalry (official joint statements linked: White House; Japan MOFA; Australian PM; Élysée; Singapore MFA; Thailand MFA). (Affairs, 2025; Australia, 2024; Élysée, 2024; House, 2023; Japan, 2023; Singapore, 2025) Thailand and Singapore also thicken networks with major partners, but the salience, speed, and breadth of Viet Nam's CSP cascade are distinctive and map directly to Proposition 1 (rivalry → institutional deepening).

Signals from UN peace operations reinforce the same strategic grammar. Viet Nam's decision to field and rotate Level-2 field hospitals to UNMISS (South Sudan)—with personnel repeatedly decorated by the UN—accumulates reputational capital consistent with a law-and-institutions brand that later carries over to maritime posture. (baochinhphu.vn, 2023; Peacekeeping, 2022) Singapore and Thailand also contribute in line with capacity and niche specialisation—Singapore emphasises long-standing UN peacekeeping participation and tool-building, while Thailand highlights steady contributions and training roles—yet Viet Nam's high-reliability medical deployments sit especially cleanly with a strategy that prizes legitimacy and coalition-compatibility over hard-alliance signalling. (MINDEF, 2025; UN, 2021)

On the trade-institutional layer, Viet Nam is simultaneously embedded in CPTPP (in force for Viet Nam since 14 January 2019) and RCEP (1 January 2022), with EVFTA (1 August 2020) and UKVFTA (1 May 2021) adding high-standard bilateral vectors. (ASEAN, 2022) This overlapping web expands option value, lowers switching costs,

and hardens partners' expectations – an institutional solution to vulnerability rather than an alliance solution. Singapore mirrors Viet Nam's dual membership in CPTPP and RCEP and pushes rule-update agendas in services and digital trade. (MTI, 2018) Thailand participates in RCEP but, as of 21 August 2025, has not acceded to CPTPP – preserving policy space while extracting RCEP gains (official rosters and UK guidance confirm current Parties; Thailand is absent). (Service, 2024) These configurations speak directly to Proposition 3 (over-dependence → diversification).

Maritime doctrine then marks the most visible through-line. Viet Nam consistently frames the South China Sea through UNCLOS and ASEAN processes (ARF/ADMM-Plus; the COC track), emphasising peaceful settlement, freedom of navigation/overflight, and the rule of law – not as mere rhetoric but as a durable template for diplomatic text, coalition-building, and capability development. (Élysée, 2025; MINDEF, 2024) Singapore, a non-claimant whose seaborne access is existential, likewise underscores UNCLOS-compliance and freedom of navigation, a rule-centric vocabulary entirely consistent with FPDA's consultative design. (Defence, 2021) Thailand – also a non-claimant – leans procedural and facilitative, hosting DOC/COC working-level meetings and urging early conclusion of an effective COC. (Affairs), 2024) In the Vietnamese variant, however, unusually frequent legal invocations are paired with concrete partnership and FTA upgrades, converting normative claims into institutional ballast – Proposition 2's (maritime risk → legal-multilateral salience) operational footprint.

Taken together, the comparison yields a compact inference about distinctiveness and testability. First, Viet Nam's non-alliance doctrine remains intact – articulated in the 2019 Defence White Paper – even as Hanoi systematically densifies cooperation via CSPs and defence dialogues, a path dependency that keeps strategic autonomy and integration growing together. Second, the partner-and-FTA web (CPTPP + RCEP + EVFTA + UKVFTA) provides economic and legal redundancy that diffuses concentration risk in markets and technologies and gives Hanoi levers to recalibrate under external shocks. Third, in maritime affairs, Viet Nam's legalization-plus-multilateralism approach (UNCLOS language, ASEAN fora, COC process) constitutes the core of a soft-balancing repertoire that constrains coercion without alliances – while Thailand's formal alliance and Singapore's FPDA membership shape different, but complementary, repertoires. In short, once

rendered operational and mapped against close regional peers, Bamboo Diplomacy travels as a strategy – not a slogan – with clear, falsifiable implications: rivalry spikes are followed by partnership upgrades; maritime risk elevates legal-multilateral salience; and rising trade/tech concentration triggers diversification moves (illustratively visible in Viet Nam's CSP cascade since 2023, its UNMISS deployments, and its overlapping FTAs).

5. CONCLUSION

Since 1975, Viet Nam's foreign policy has systematically shifted from ideological alignment to an operational, testable strategy – “Bamboo Diplomacy” – defined by clear objectives, a distinct toolkit, and explicit activation conditions. Reading across three developmental stages (post-unification, *Đổi Mới*, and deep integration), three standardized case studies (normalization and framework upgrades with the United States; ASEAN integration; management of South China Sea risk), and a focused comparison with Thailand and Singapore, the evidence is consistent with the paper's three propositions: when great-power rivalry intensifies, Viet Nam prioritizes partnership upgrades and the densification of institutional commitments; when maritime risk rises, legal-multilateral instruments outperform bilateral ones; and when signals of trade/technology dependence cross policy thresholds, diversification moves (FTAs and sector-specific cooperation roadmaps) are activated. In effect, the “bamboo” metaphor is converted into a falsifiable analytical framework with observable indicators for partnership depth, the density of legal-institutional ties, and issue-specific shifts in instrument choice.

The study's scholarly contribution is to clarify the boundaries among Bamboo Diplomacy, hedging, and soft balancing along three axes – ultimate goals, primary instruments, and activation conditions – thereby linking three theoretical traditions: realism (small-state balancing), liberal institutionalism (constraint via law and organizations), and constructivism (state identity and performance legitimacy). Layering partnerships instead of signing alliances, “legalizing” cooperation through UNCLOS/ASEAN, and applying sector-calibrated hedging together suggest a generalizable model of autonomy through integration for small states in Southeast Asia and other multipolar regions – especially amid the ongoing reconfiguration of supply chains, technology regimes, and digital standards.

Policy-wise, the framework advances a coherent operating design: (i) institutional lock-in without alliances (strategic/“comprehensive strategic” partnerships, executable roadmaps, and defence-security dialogues); (ii) law-of-the-sea and regional institutions at the core of maritime and broader security governance, turning principles into enforceable expectations and reputational costs; (iii) mission-tied security cooperation without mutual-defence clauses; (iv) diversification of markets, technology, and supply chains through an overlapping FTA network to expand option value against external shocks; and (v) coupling external flexibility to domestic capacity—macroeconomic stability, regulatory quality, human capital, and technological absorption—as the credibility base for partnerships and FTA gains. The framework also identifies boundary conditions: domestic adjustment costs, resource constraints, the risk of “over-institutionalization” without implementation, and signaling hazards in a rapidly shifting competitive environment.

Methodologically, the present analysis is observational and text-based, and it does not yet establish tight causal identification between instruments and outcomes. To strengthen credibility and external validity, next steps should: (1) combine archival research and targeted elite interviews with text-as-data methods (measuring the

frequency/specificity of UNCLOS, “rule of law,” and FON/FOO language in UN/ASEAN/partner communiqués); (2) build monthly panels tracking trade/FDI/technology concentration (HHI), maritime incidents, and FTA utilization, linked to economic-institutional covariates from national statistics; (3) implement event-study designs around quasi-exogenous milestones (partnership announcements/upgrades; FTA entry-into-force) with robustness checks (synthetic control, difference-in-differences, and interrupted time-series); and (4) standardize reproducibility protocols (code, data, and semantic dictionaries) to enable independent verification and cross-national benchmarking.

In sum, by demonstrating testable links between structural competition, the chosen instrument mix, and observable outcomes, the study offers a closed-loop model of how Viet Nam—and, by extension, other small states—can preserve strategic autonomy while deepening integration in a risk-interlaced multipolar order. “Bamboo Diplomacy,” therefore, is not a fashionable slogan but a measurable, predictive, and resilient strategy—one capable of operating across cycles of great-power rivalry, supply-chain realignment, and technological transition, provided it is paired with disciplined external institutionalization and sustained improvements in domestic implementation capacity.

APPENDICES

Table 3: Key Periods of Vietnam's Foreign Policy.

Period	International Context	Foreign Policy	Key Events	Economic & Political Impact
1975–1986	Cold War tensions between the socialist and capitalist blocs, Vietnam under international sanctions.	Ideological alignment with the socialist bloc, confrontation with the West, military involvement in Cambodia.	Joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) with the Soviet Union, faced international isolation due to the Cambodia conflict.	Economically isolated, dependent on Soviet aid, economic difficulties, high inflation.
1986–2001	Collapse of the Soviet Union, shifting world order, focus on economic development by many nations.	Đổi Mới (Renovation), diversification of foreign relations, normalization with China and the U.S., joining ASEAN.	Joined ASEAN in 1995, normalized relations with the U.S., became a member of APEC in 1998.	Economic growth improved, increased FDI, regional and global integration.
2001–Present	Globalization, U.S.-China strategic competition, multipolar world, deeper economic integration.	Comprehensive integration, participation in CPTPP, RCEP, establishment of strategic partnerships, implementation of “Bamboo Diplomacy.”	Joined WTO in 2007, signed CPTPP in 2018, elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2020-2021).	Became a dynamic economy, strong export growth, increasing role in regional and global affairs.

This table provides a clear illustration of Vietnam's foreign policy evolution across different phases, emphasizing the international context, policies, key milestones, economic-political impact, and

references.

5.1. Vietnam's Foreign Policy Timeline

Phase 1: Post-Unification and Ideological

Alignment (1975–1986)

- 1975: Vietnam reunifies after the end of the Vietnam War.
- 1977: Joins the United Nations (UN), but faces international sanctions.
- 1978: Enters the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) under Soviet influence.
- 1979: War with China and international isolation.
- 1980s: Economic difficulties, hyperinflation, and dependence on Soviet aid.
- 1986: Đổi Mới (Renovation) Policy introduced, signaling a shift from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy.

▼ Transition: Shift from ideological foreign relations (aligned with the Soviet bloc) to pragmatic economic reforms.

Phase 2: Reform and Diplomatic Normalization (1986–2001)

- 1988: Introduction of the "Diversification and Multilateralization" foreign policy doctrine (Resolution 13).
- 1989: Vietnam withdraws troops from Cambodia → begins normalization with ASEAN.
- 1991: Normalization of relations with China after years of tension.
- 1993: Vietnam receives support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.
- 1995:
 - o Joins ASEAN as a full member.
 - o Normalizes relations with the United States (after two decades of hostility).
 - 1998: Becomes a member of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

▼ Transition: Vietnam moves from regional isolation to global reintegration and economic diplomacy.

Phase 3: Deeper International Integration (2001–Present)

- 2001: Establishes comprehensive partnerships with Russia and China.
- 2007: Joins the World Trade Organization (WTO), marking full global economic integration.
- 2010: Expands strategic partnerships with Japan, South Korea, and India.
- 2013: Signs the Comprehensive Partnership Agreement with the United States.
- 2018: Signs the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).
- 2020–2021: Serves as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.
- 2023: Upgrades the Vietnam–United States relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.
- As of May 2025, Vietnam has established Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with the following 13 countries:
 - China (since 2008)
 - Russia (since 2012)
 - India (since 2016)
 - South Korea (since 2022)
 - United States (since September 2023)
 - Japan (since November 2023)
 - Australia (since March 2024)
 - France (since October 2024)
 - Malaysia (since November 2024)
 - New Zealand (since February 2025)
 - Indonesia (since March 2025)
 - Singapore (since March 2025)
 - Thailand (since May 2025)

▼ Transition: Vietnam consolidates its position as a key economic and diplomatic player in global affairs.

Acknowledgments: This research was funded solely by the VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, under project number USSH-2024.32.

Ethical approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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