Risk and Threat Perception
in the Indo-Pacific

Vietnam

Vũ Lê Thái Hoàng
Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam

Ngô Di Lân
Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam

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I. Introduction: Risk and Threat to National Security

1.1 Key Threats to National Security

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, national security concerns extend beyond traditional military threats, encompassing a broader spectrum of issues that influence a nation's stability and prosperity. For Vietnam, which is situated in one of the most economically dynamic regions in the world, the perception and management of these risks are critical for ensuring sovereignty, economic growth, and social harmony. This report is an in-depth analysis of Vietnam's most pressing security challenges, examining their origins, implications, and potential mitigation strategies.

A complex interplay between regional and global dynamics shapes Vietnam's national security. The key threats and challenges include:

(i) Strategic competition among major powers: The current strategic competition among major powers, particularly between the US and China, can plunge the entire region into a Cold War-like situation. This affects Vietnam's foreign policies and defense strategies, which require a delicate balance to maintain autonomy while leveraging economic and security partnership opportunities. Therefore, Vietnam must navigate this competition to maximize cooperation benefits with both sides without entangling in conflicts.

(ii) Gray zone tactics in the South China Sea: China's use of gray zone tactics, such as the deployment of maritime militias, coast guard vessels, and artificial island-building in the South China Sea, threatens Vietnam's territorial integrity and economic interests. These tactics have created a persistent state of tension, challenged Vietnam's territorial claims, and exploited ambiguities in international law. Vietnam's response involves strengthening its maritime capabilities, enhancing surveillance, and pursuing diplomatic and legal measures to ensure its rights. Hence, this presents immediate risks and long-term strategic challenges that require a robust and multifaceted approach.

(iii) Climate change: Climate change poses significant risks to Vietnam, with rising sea levels, increased frequency of natural disasters, and changing weather patterns affecting agriculture, infrastructure, and overall socioeconomic stability. Vietnam's proactive measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change include investing in sustainable development, enhancing disaster preparedness, and participating in international climate agreements. Therefore, addressing climate change is a matter of national security and an opportunity for Vietnam to lead regional environmental initiatives and develop a green economy.

Understanding and addressing these threats requires viewing them in a dialectical relationship with opportunities since in each challenge lies the potential for strategic gain. For instance, strategic competition among major powers can enhance Vietnam's geopolitical significance and attract investment. Gray zone tactics in the South China Sea, while posing threats, support the modernization of Vietnam's defense capabilities and strengthen alliances with like-minded countries. Moreover, despite its adverse effects, climate change allows Vietnam to innovate green technologies and build resilience through sustainable practices.

Arguably, the current strategic competition among major powers, particularly between the US and China, has the most substantial long-term impact on Vietnam's security. This multifaceted phenomenon encompasses economic, technological, and military dimensions. Additionally, the ongoing trade disputes and the potential decoupling of supply chains have far-reaching implications for the global economy. As the two largest economies in the world, the trade policies and economic trajectories of the US and China significantly impact international trade flows and investment patterns. Competition for economic influence could lead to a fragmented global economic landscape, with countries increasingly aligning themselves with one of the two powers.

In the technology domain, the current power competition is intense. Both countries are vying for supremacy in cutting-edge technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), 5G networks, and quantum computing. This competition is driven by economic considerations and the recognition that these technologies will impact military capabilities and national security. Divergence in technology standards and ecosystems could result in a complex and divided digital landscape, with countries navigating competing technology spheres.

The military dimension of the US-China strategic competition is a concern for regional stability. As both nations strive to project influence and secure interests, increased military presence and activity in the region is inevitable. In particular, the South China Sea has become a ground for military show-off, with China enforcing its territorial and maritime claims and the US

conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). Heightened military activity in the region increases the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation, which can have severe consequences for regional peace and stability.

As the US-China strategic competition intensifies, countries in the region may face increased pressure to choose sides. This could lead to a polarized regional landscape, with countries navigating competing economic, technological, and military interests. Moreover, competition can undermine regional cooperation and integration efforts as countries are incentivized to prioritize bilateral relationships with major powers over multilateral engagement. Strategic competition could divert resources and attention away from pressing regional challenges, such as climate change, poverty, and transnational crime. Addressing these challenges requires concerted effort and cooperation among all countries in the region, which may be challenging to achieve in a highly competitive geopolitical environment.

The use of gray zone tactics by some parties in the South China Sea has far-reaching implications[1] for countries in the region, including Vietnam. The South China Sea is a vital waterway for global trade, with an estimated one-third of the world's ship passing through its waters. It is rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and fisheries. The region's competing territorial claims and increasing militarization have made the sea a focal point for regional tensions and a potential flashpoint for conflict.

China's claims to the South China Sea, as outlined in its "nine-dash line," have been a concern for other claimants. China has asserted and enforced its claims through a combination of law enforcement and maritime militia, diplomatic pressures, economic coercion, and military presence. Over the past 10 years, it has engaged in large-scale land reclamation and construction activities on disputed islands and reefs, creating huge artificial islands for hosting military facilities and airstrips. These have altered the physical and strategic landscape of the region, making peaceful resolution of disputes difficult.

Using gray zone tactics in the South China Sea has significant implications for regional stability and the law. They challenge the integrity and effectiveness of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which provides a legal framework for resolving maritime disputes and ensuring the peaceful use of the world's oceans, highlighting the gaps in its enforcement mechanisms. The erosion of rule-based order in the region could lead to a volatile and unpredictable security environment, with countries increasingly relying on unilateral actions to protect their interests.[2] Therefore, the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), signed in 2002 by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states and China, was an important step toward peacefully

[1] Michael J. Mazarr, "Mastering the gray zone: Understanding a changing era of conflict," US Army War College Press, 2015. https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/428

[2] Trang T. Ngo, "Grey zone conflict in the South China Sea and challenges," The Asia-Pacific Journal of International Humanitarian Law 1 (2021): 209–37. https://apjihl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/009-Grey-Zone-Ngo.pdf

managing disputes and preventing the escalation of tensions through cooperative measures. It represents a significant diplomatic effort to manage conflicts and maintain regional stability. However, its nonbinding nature and lack of concrete enforcement mechanisms limit its effectiveness, allowing for continued assertive actions that contravene its spirit.

Despite these limitations, the DOC has laid the groundwork for ongoing negotiations toward a comprehensive and binding Code of Conduct (COC). A robust and enforceable COC could reinforce the UNCLOS's principles and enhance regional cooperation, addressing the current challenges posed by gray zone tactics and restoring confidence in rule-based orders. The intersection of UNCLOS, DOC, and the ongoing COC efforts underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to maritime security in the South China Sea. Strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing diplomatic engagement, and building regional cooperation are essential steps toward mitigating the risks associated with gray zone activities. With these, the region can have a more stable and predictable security environment where disputes are resolved peacefully and international laws[3] are upheld. This collective effort will contribute to regional peace and stability, benefiting all parties involved.

Hence, the South China Sea dispute poses significant challenges to regional economies because its uncertainty and instability disrupt trade flows and investments in the region. The exploitation of natural resources, particularly oil and gas, could become more complex and expensive as claimant states assert their rights and protect their interests. Moreover, the use of gray zone tactics to enforce claims could strain diplomatic relationships among countries in the region, making it difficult to address other regional challenges and promote economic cooperation. To effectively resolve the South China Sea dispute and ensure long-term peace, stability, and prosperity in the region, responsible leadership from major powers is crucial. These countries must prioritize the common goals of regional and international peace, stability, and prosperity and work toward mutually acceptable solutions. All parties involved must uphold international law, particularly UNCLOS. Adherence to UNCLOS and other relevant international laws will build trust and promote a rule-based approach to addressing complex issues in the South China Sea.

Furthermore, claimant states must demonstrate goodwill and sincerity in negotiations to respect the legitimate interests of other nations. This requires a commitment to open dialogue, seeking mutual understanding, and compromising where necessary. By fostering an environment of trust and cooperation, claimant states can peacefully resolve disputes and prevent them from escalating into serious conflicts.

Climate change is a pressing threat to Vietnam's security as it has the potential to exacerbate tensions and create new challenges for Southeast

[3] Raymond Powell, "A South China Sea code of conduct cannot be built on a foundation of bad faith," The Diplomat, November 18, 2023. https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/a-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct-cannot-be-built-on-a-foundation-of-bad-faith/

Asian countries. Rising sea levels threaten the inundation of low-lying coastal areas, displacing communities and disrupting agriculture. Furthermore, changing rainfall patterns affect water availability and crop yield. The increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters, such as typhoons and floods, strain national resources and infrastructure. These environmental challenges threaten Vietnam's socioeconomic stability and pose significant risks to national security.

The Mekong River, which flows through six countries in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, is a vital source of water, food, and energy for millions of people. Rivers and their ecosystems are under increasing stress from climate change, with rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and sea-level rise contributing to an uncertain and unpredictable future. The Mekong's importance extends beyond Vietnam, impacting the water, energy, and food security of the entire region. Disruptions to the river's flow and health can lead to resource conflicts, affecting ASEAN's stability and potentially causing reverberations throughout the region. Therefore, addressing the impact of climate change on the Mekong subregion is crucial for maintaining regional security and ensuring sustainable development for all the countries that depend on its resources.

The impacts of climate change on the Mekong subregion are evident, with frequent and severe droughts, floods, and storms affecting the livelihoods and well-being of communities along the river. In recent years, the Mekong River has experienced record-low water levels, with drought conditions affecting agriculture, fisheries, and hydropower production. Rising sea levels and saltwater intrusion threaten the fertility of the Mekong Delta, one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. These impacts will intensify in the coming decades as global temperatures rise and climate change becomes more pronounced. Therefore, the social and economic implications of climate change in the Mekong subregion are significant. The loss of agricultural productivity and decline in fisheries could lead to food insecurity and economic hardship for millions who depend on rivers for their livelihoods. The displacement of communities due to sea-level rise and other climate-related impacts could create new social and political tensions as people are forced to migrate to urban areas or across borders in search of better opportunities. Moreover, competition for increasingly scarce water resources could strain the relationships among countries in the region, particularly because upstream dams and water diversions affect downstream flows and exacerbate the impacts of climate change.

1.2 Other Threats to National Security

Transnational threats, such as regional and global pandemics, cyberattacks, supply chain disruptions, and socioeconomic disruptions caused by emerging

technologies, including AI, pose significant challenges to Vietnam's national security, economy, and social stability. Although these threats rank below traditional security concerns, albeit closely, they have a substantial potential for widespread harm. In particular, regional and global pandemics have underscored the vulnerabilities inherent in an interconnected world. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how quickly infectious diseases can spread across borders, overwhelming healthcare systems and disrupting economic activities.

Vietnam's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was commendable, characterized by early and decisive measures that effectively contained the virus. The country's public health strategy, which included widespread testing, contact tracing, and quarantine protocols, significantly mitigated the impact of the virus on its population.[4] Nevertheless, the pandemic inflicted considerable economic damage,[5] particularly on the tourism, manufacturing, and export sectors. The tourism industry, a significant contributor to Vietnam's gross domestic product, experienced a notable downturn owing to travel restrictions and reduced international mobility. Similarly, manufacturing and export activities faced disruptions due to global supply chain interruptions and decreased demands. Looking ahead, the potential for future pandemics remains a concern in Vietnam[6] and the broader region. The emergence of new pathogens and the increasing frequency of zoonotic diseases highlight the need for a robust public health infrastructure and international cooperation to combat future pandemics and biosecurity threats.

Cyberattacks are a rapidly escalating threat to Vietnam's national security and economic interests. As countries become digitally connected, they become increasingly susceptible to cyber threats, including hacking, malware, and espionage. These attacks can disrupt critical infrastructure, such as power grids, financial systems, and communication networks, leading to widespread economic and social disruptions. The theft of sensitive data from government and private sectors poses threats to national security and disrupts businesses. Additionally, such breaches can significantly undermine public trust in digital systems, which is essential for the modern digital economy.

In 2023, Vietnam experienced approximately 14,000 cyberattacks on various systems.[7] For example, two significant incidents involved VNDirect and PVOil.[8] These attacks severely affected their operations, highlighting the vulnerability of high-security sectors, such as finance and energy. These attacks were primarily made by external hackers and underscore the need for improved cybersecurity measures and awareness among Vietnamese enterprises, emphasizing that such incidents are the tip of the iceberg.

[4] Era Dabla-Norris and Yuanyan Sophia Zhang, "Vietnam: Successfully navigating the pandemic," IMF, March 10, 2021. https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/03/09/na031021-vietnam-successfully-navigating-the-pandemic

[5] PricewaterhouseCoopers, "COVID-19 impact assessment: Analysis of the potential impacts of COVID-19 on Vietnamese economy," PwC Vietnam, 2020. https://www.pwc.com/vn/en/publications/vietnam-publications/economy-covid19.html

[6] PricewaterhouseCoopers, "Vietnam outlook 2022: Economic prospects in the wake of COVID-19," PwC Vietnam, 2022. https://www.pwc.com/vn/en/publications/vietnam-publications/220221-pwc-vietnam-outlook-en.html

[7] An Khánh, "Nearly 14,000 cyberattacks targeted systems in Vietnam in one year," Lao Động, March 30, 2024. https://laodong.vn/cong-nghe/gan-14000-vu-tan-cong-mang-nham-vao-cac-he-thong-tai-viet-nam-trong-mot-nam-1321384.ldo

[8] Mạnh Chung, "Consecutive cyberattacks on Vietnamese businesses: 'Just the tip of the iceberg'," VnEconomy, April 5, 2024. https://vneconomy.vn/lien-tiep-cac-vu-tan-cong-mang-vao-doanh-nghiep-viet-chi-la-phan-noi-cua-tang-bang.htm

The impact of cyberattacks on Vietnam is multifaceted and profound. The disruption of critical infrastructure can result in immediate and long-term economic losses, affecting everything, from daily business operations to national economic stability. Cyber espionage can lead to the loss of confidential information, compromising national defense strategies and diplomatic relationships. Moreover, the erosion of public trust in digital systems can impede the adoption of digital technologies, slowing down the country's progress in digital transformation. Hence, cyberattacks pose a significant threat[9] to Vietnam's continued development and stability in an increasingly interconnected world.

The socioeconomic disruption caused by emerging technologies, including AI, poses a significant threat to Vietnam's national security and social stability. The rapid development and deployment of AI and other advanced technologies profoundly change labor markets, potentially displacing workers and creating unemployment in specific sectors. Automation and AI-driven processes can replace traditional jobs, particularly in manufacturing and low-skilled services, which are critical to the Vietnamese economy. This shift could exacerbate existing social inequalities as those with higher education and technical skills are more likely to benefit from new opportunities while others may struggle to adapt. Moreover, integrating AI and emerging technologies into critical infrastructures and systems introduces new vulnerabilities. Cybersecurity risks are amplified as these technologies become integral to essential services, such as healthcare, transportation, and energy. The complexity and interconnectivity of AI systems can lead to unforeseen failures or targeted cyberattacks, causing widespread disruption. Additionally, using AI in decision-making processes raises ethical concerns, including algorithm biases and the potential misuse of personal data, undermining public trust and social cohesion.

The potential impacts of these disruptions are far-reaching. Social instability may arise from increased unemployment and widening economic disparities, leading to civil unrest and strain on the social welfare system. Economic disruption can hinder Vietnam's growth and competitiveness as industries struggle to keep pace with technological advancements. Furthermore, ethical and legal challenges surrounding AI use and emerging technologies require careful consideration to ensure responsible development and deployment. Although emerging technologies offer significant benefits, their potential to disrupt socioeconomic structures poses a critical challenge to Vietnam's stability and security.

1.3 Identification and Prioritization

Identifying and ranking security issues in Vietnam is a complex process influenced by internal assessments and external factors. The nature of threats

[9] PricewaterhouseCoopers, "2022 global digital trust insights survey: Vietnam report," PwC Vietnam, 2022. https://www.pwc.com/vn/en/publications/vietnam-publications/digital-trust-insights-2022.html

can vary significantly, encompassing traditional military concerns, non-traditional security challenges, and socioeconomic disruptions. According to the comprehensive security approach outlined in the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the highest priority is safeguarding national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of the political regime.[10] This holistic perspective integrates human security and intersectoral cooperation, recognizing the multifaceted nature of contemporary security threats.

Strategic competition among major powers, notably the US and China, is considered a significant long-term challenge. This competition manifests in the economic, technological, and military arenas, which affect global trade, technology standards, and regional stability. Vietnam must carefully navigate this rivalry to maintain its autonomy and leverage opportunities for economic growth and technological advancement. Furthermore, competition poses risks to regional security architecture, requiring Vietnam to bolster its diplomatic and defensive strategies. The South China Sea dispute remains a critical concern because of its direct impact on Vietnam's territorial integrity and socioeconomic well-being. The use of gray zone tactics and assertive actions in disputed waters challenges Vietnam's maritime claims and threatens its fishing and energy resources. Upholding the UNCLOS principles, pursuing cooperative measures, such as the DOC, and working toward a legally binding COC are essential for managing these disputes and maintaining regional stability.

The impacts of climate change, particularly in the Mekong subregion, represent a pressing security issue. The Mekong River is crucial for the water security, energy production, and food supply of the people in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. Rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and sea-level rise exacerbate existing environmental stresses, leading to frequent and severe droughts and floods. These changes threaten agricultural productivity, energy infrastructure, and socioeconomic stability. Addressing climate change and its impacts on the Mekong subregion requires regional cooperation and sustainable management practices to ensure the long-term security and prosperity of all the nations that rely on its resources.

Moreover, non-traditional threats, such as pandemics, cyberattacks, and socioeconomic disruptions caused by emerging technologies, are increasingly recognized as significant risks. The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified the vulnerability of interconnected economies and highlighted the need for robust public health infrastructure and international cooperation. As Vietnam becomes digitally connected, cyber threats pose risks to critical infrastructure and data security, undermining national security and economic stability. The rapid advancement of technologies has raised concerns about labor market disruptions, social inequalities, and new

[10] Communist Review, "The 13th National Party Congress resolution," August 25, 2021. https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/english/focus/detail/-/asset_publisher/FMhwM2oQCZEZ/content/the-13th-national-party-congress-resolution

vulnerabilities in critical systems. Vietnam's policy documents, including the 2019 National Defense White Paper and the 13th Party Congress documents, have noted several threats, risks, and challenges to national security. Together, these documents articulate the strategic context and defense approach that shape Vietnam's approach to national security. For instance, the 2019 National Defense White Paper noted that strategic competition among the major powers, ensuring maritime security and climate change, are significant challenges. It emphasized the importance of addressing non-traditional security issues, such as cyber threats, terrorism, and transnational crimes, in collaboration with international partners.

Furthermore, documents from the 13th Party Congress and other state publications[11] reinforce these priorities by aligning national defense strategies with socioeconomic development goals. They underscore the necessity of integrating defense and security considerations into all aspects of national planning, from economic development to technological innovation. This comprehensive approach will enhance Vietnam's resilience against varied threats while promoting sustainable growth and stability.

1.4 Discussion

Public and professional discussions on risk and threat perception in Vietnam are ongoing and multifaceted. Academic institutions, think tanks, and policy forums regularly discuss these issues and contribute to the dynamic discourse on national security. The media plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding and awareness of security threats.[12] Discussions often focus on the implications of geopolitical shifts, the effectiveness of national defense strategies, and the challenges posed by emerging technologies and non-traditional threats.

In recent years, the discourse has increasingly highlighted the importance of the cyber domain and the potential socioeconomic impacts of AI and automation. These discussions reflect the growing recognition of the interconnected nature of modern security challenges and the need for a holistic and adaptive approach to threat management. The Vietnamese government's proactive stance in addressing these issues through strategic policies and international cooperation underscores its commitment to safeguarding national security in a rapidly evolving global context. For instance, in 2021, it released a national development strategy on AI until 2030 to make the country a leader in AI applications.

[11] Communist Party of Vietnam, "Resolution dated February 01, 2022 on the 13th National Congress Khongso, Nghị Quyết Khongso 2022," LawNet, January 2, 2022. https://www.lawnet.vn/en/vb/Resolution-2022-13th-National-Congress-7D534.html

[12] Douglas M. McLeod and Dhavan V. Shah, "News frames and national security: Covering Big Brother," Cambridge University Press, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfv044

1.5 Risk and Threat Perception Over Time

Risk and threat perceptions in Vietnam have evolved over the past decades and have been shaped by several factors, including domestic development and international dynamics. The end of the Cold War, regional economic integration, and the rise of new security challenges have influenced Vietnam's security outlook. Historically focusing on conventional military threats, Vietnam's security strategy has broadened to include a wide array of non-traditional threats, reflecting the changing nature of global and regional security environments.

This evolution in perception can be attributed to Vietnam's expansive view of security, which has become increasingly comprehensive and encompasses human security. This broader perspective acknowledges that security is not solely defined by military strength, instead includes the well-being and resilience of the population. Public health, economic stability, food security, and environmental sustainability are integral to Vietnam's security. By adopting this holistic approach, it is better equipped to address the multifaceted nature of contemporary threats, ensuring a stable and prosperous future for its citizens, while contributing to regional and global stability. This comprehensive security framework underscores its commitment to safeguarding national interests through a balanced and inclusive strategy that addresses traditional and non-traditional threats.

The strategic competition between the US and China, and increasingly between the US and Russia due to the Ukraine conflict, has heightened Vietnam's awareness of geopolitical risks and the need for strategic autonomy. The increasing frequency of cyberattacks and the transformative potential of emerging technologies have shifted the focus toward cybersecurity and technological resilience. Additionally, the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation have become more prominent, particularly in the Mekong Delta and coastal regions. Overall, Vietnam's risk and threat perceptions are characterized by high adaptability, with it responding to emerging challenges while maintaining a strong focus on traditional security concerns.

II. Analysis of Key Issues and Current Perception

2.1 Major Power Competition

The issue of major power competition, particularly between the US and China, is deeply embedded in the geopolitical and economic transformations of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. After the Cold War, the US emerged as the sole superpower, with unparalleled economic and military dominance. During the 1990s and the early 2000s, China, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and his successors, embarked on a path of economic reform, which led to unprecedented economic growth.[13] This period saw China becoming more integrated into the global economy, marked by its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. China's rapid economic rise shifted global power dynamics, challenging the unipolarity that characterized the post-Cold War order.

As China's economic power grew, so did its ambitions and capabilities. The 2008 global financial crisis further accelerated this shift, as China emerged relatively unscathed while the US and other Western economies struggled. China's growing confidence was evident in its active foreign policies and military modernization efforts. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 symbolized China's ambition to expand its global influence through infrastructure investments and economic partnerships. Consequently, the US[14] increasingly perceived China as a competitor and a potential rival that could challenge its global hegemony. This perception was partially caused by the US pivoting to Asia during the Obama administration to strengthen alliances and increase its military presence in the Asia-Pacific.

The strategic rivalry between the US and China has become a defining feature of global geopolitics, encompassing economic, technological, military, and ideological dimensions. This competition has significantly influenced the policies and strategies of various nations, including Vietnam. The evolution of this major power competition has been marked by increasing tension and strategic maneuvers. In the economic domain, the US-China trade war, initiated under the Trump administration, intensified competition. Tariffs and sanctions became tools of economic warfare to curtail China's technological advancement and reduce trade imbalances.[15] Technological competition intensified, particularly in fields, such as 5G networks, AI, and quantum computing. The US sought to limit China's access to cutting-edge technologies by employing the "small yard, high fence" strategy, fearing that Chinese technological advancements could translate into military superiority and economic dominance.[16] This competition bifurcated global technology standards and supply chains, with countries

[13] Khalid Manzoor Butt and Sarah Sajid, "Chinese economy under Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping," Journal of Political Studies 25 (2018): 169–78. www.researchgate.net/publication/\333816253_Chinese_Economy_under_Mao_Zedong_and_Deng_Xiaoping

[14] Stephanie Christine Winkler, "Strategic competition and US-China relations: A conceptual analysis," The Chinese Journal of International Politics 16(3) (2023): 333–56. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad008

[15] Anton Kristoff and Adrian Wu, "The US-China trade war heats up," Project Syndicate, June 5, 2024. www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/the-us-china-trade-war-heats-up

[16] Cameron Cavanagh, "U.S. economic restrictions on China: Small yard, high fence?" Georgetown Security Studies Review, December 26, 2023. https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2023/12/26/u-s-economic-restrictions-on-china-small-yard-high-fence/

and companies often pressurized to align with either the US or Chinese systems.

The current power competition between the two countries is characterized by a complex and multifaceted interplay of cooperation, competition, and confrontation. Despite the ongoing economic interdependence, strategic distrust remains high, fueled by divergent geopolitical interests and ideological differences. The Biden administration has largely maintained its predecessor's policies, emphasizing the need to counter China's growing influence while engaging in dialogue on issues of mutual concern, such as climate change and global health.[17] This reflects the importance of managing the relationship with China, which is both a strategic competitor and a potential partner in addressing global challenges. However, the underlying tensions and rivalries between the two powers continue to simmer, with both sides seeking to protect and advance their national interests in an increasingly complex and uncertain international environment.

Military tensions between the US and China are particularly palpable in the Indo-Pacific region, with the South China Sea as the focal point. China's territorial claims and ongoing militarization in the region have prompted robust responses from the US and its allies who view these actions as threats to regional stability and FONOPs.[18] The US sought to counter China's influence by strengthening its regional alliances and partnerships, conducting joint military exercises, and increasing its naval presence. Beyond the military, the competition extends to international institutions and norms, with both sides seeking to shape global governance structures that reflect their interests and values. China has sought to increase its influence through initiatives, such as the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, while the US has sought to rally its allies and partners to uphold rules-based international orders. This evolving dynamic suggests that power competition will remain a defining feature of international relationships in the coming years, with far-reaching implications for global stability, economic prosperity, and the geopolitical balance of power.

This power competition has received much attention in Vietnamese media. The government frequently addresses this issue in strategic documents and official statements, reflecting its importance for national security and economic policy. For instance, the 2019 National Defense White Paper highlighted the significance of strategic competition and its implications for Vietnam's security environment. This underscores the necessity of navigating a complex geopolitical landscape in which Vietnam must balance its relationships with both powers while safeguarding its sovereignty and national interests. Simultaneously, news outlets regularly cover developments related to trade tensions, military activities in the South China Sea, and diplomatic engagement. These topics are often analyzed in

[17] Evan S. Medeiros, "The new domestic politics of US-China relations," Asia Society Policy Institute, December 7, 2023. https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/new-domestic-politics-us-china-relations

[18] Jihyun Kim, "Territorial disputes in the South China Sea: Implications for security in Asia and beyond," Strategic Studies Quarterly 9(2) (2015): 107–41.

terms of their potential effects on Vietnam's economy, security, and foreign policy. Popular debate, particularly on social media sites, such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, reflects public interest and concern about how this power competition influences everyday life. This widespread attention indicates a high level of public awareness of and engagement with the issue, which is crucial for Vietnam's stability and prosperity.

In this context, Vietnam has garnered various responses to the BRI. Many recognize the potential economic benefits of BRI participation, including enhanced infrastructure and increased investment. Vietnam's strategic geographic position makes it a natural partner in the initiative's goal to improve regional connectivity and trade networks. Its approach to the BRI has been characterized by careful evaluation and selective engagement. This stance aligns with the country's broader economic and foreign-policy objectives, which prioritize balanced international relationships and sustainable development. Policymakers are interested in collaborating on projects that complement national development plans while maintaining diverse international partnerships. This nuanced approach reflects Vietnam's efforts to navigate the complex economic and geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia by balancing potential opportunities from the BRI with strategic autonomy and diversified economic ties.

However, the level of attention to the power competition has increased over time in Vietnam. During the immediate post-Cold War era, the focus was primarily on economic development and integration into the global economy, with less emphasis on geopolitical rivalries. Nonetheless, as China's economic and military capabilities grew and the US asserted its presence more strongly in the Asia-Pacific region, the perception of a major power competition became more pronounced. This shift was particularly evident during the 2010s as tensions in the South China Sea escalated and trade conflicts between the US and China intensified. In recent years, the attention has increased owing to several developments. The Trump-initiated trade war against China and the strategic competition in the technological and military domains have brought this issue to the forefront. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities and dependencies in global supply chains, further underscoring the strategic importance of major power dynamics. The 2019 National Defense White Paper reflected this heightened attention, detailing the strategic context and emphasizing the need for Vietnam to navigate these challenges. The evolving nature of these threats and their direct implications for Vietnam's security and economic interests have ensured that power competition remains a central concern.

The risk perceptions of the power competition are widely shared in Vietnam. Those in government or policymaking circles adopt a balanced approach, emphasizing the importance of maintaining stable, healthy, and harmonious relationships with both the US and China. This is evident from

Vietnam's foreign policy, which leverages economic opportunities while safeguarding national sovereignty and security. Official documents, such as the 2019 National Defense White Paper and the 13th Party Congress resolution, articulate this balanced strategy, highlighting the need to enhance defense capabilities while promoting international cooperation and dialogue. Security experts and academic circles provide a nuanced analysis of the strategic implications of the competition for regional stability and national security. They emphasize the need for Vietnam to strengthen its defense posture and diversify its international partnerships to mitigate the risks associated with major power competition.[19]

The power competition intersects with several significant policy discussions in Vietnam. The key questions revolve around economic dependency and diversification. As strategic competition intensifies, Vietnam faces the challenge of balancing its economic ties with both countries. The trade war has highlighted vulnerabilities in the global supply chains,[20] which has prompted discussions on how Vietnam can diversify its trade partnerships and reduce its dependency on a single market.[21] Another related discussion focuses on regional security and defense strategies. The South China Sea, a critical maritime region for Vietnam, is a potential hotspot for military and geopolitical tension. Vietnam's stance on sovereignty claims and the efforts to strengthen its maritime defense capabilities have been continuously discussed and assessed in the context of this power competition. The implications for ASEAN's cohesion and regional security frameworks form a part of this broader discussion as Vietnam advocates a rule-based order and multilateral approaches to conflict resolution.

The risk posed by the power competition is expected to remain significant in the near future, with strategic rivalry showing little signs of abatement. This contest spans the economic, technological, and military dimensions, each with profound implications for regional stability. Both superpowers have intensified their engagement and defended their interests, leading to a complex geopolitical landscape. Their actions and policies reverberate throughout the region, particularly in the South China Sea, where tensions are anticipated to remain heightened. China's assertive territorial claims and militarization have raised concerns among neighboring countries and the international community. In response, the US persists with FONOPs and bolsters its military presence to counter China's influence and uphold international laws. This dynamic could result in increased militarization and a heightened risk of confrontation as both powers assert their dominance in this strategically critical area.

The economic dimension of the competition is likely to have significant regional implications. The ongoing trade disputes and technological competition have led to economic decoupling as companies diversify their supply chains to reduce their dependence on China. This is expected to continue,

[19] Trinh Viet Dung and Dieu Huyen Ho, "Vietnam's Response to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Context of a Rising China," Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs 43(1) (2024): 120-147. https://doi.org/10.1177/186810342412 37813

[20] Yi Huang, Lin Chen, Sibo Liu, and Heiwai Tang, "Supply chain linkages and financial markets: Evaluating the costs of the US-China trade war," In M. A. Crowley (Ed.), Trade war: The clash of economic systems endangering global prosperity, CEPR Press, 2019, 65–72. https://cepr.org/system/files/publication-files/60137-trade_war_the_clash_of_economic_systems_threatening_global_prosperity.pdf

[21] Duc Anh Dang and Ngoc Anh Tran, "The effects of the United States-China trade war during the COVID-19 pandemic on global supply chains: Evidence from Viet Nam," ERIA Discussion Paper Series No. 483, August 29, 2023. https://www.eria.org/publications/the-effects-of-the-united-stateschina-trade-war-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-global-supply-chains-evidence-from-viet-nam

potentially reshaping regional economic ties and presenting challenges and opportunities for countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Intensifying technological competition, especially in 5G networks, AI, and semiconductor production, further complicates the economic landscape and has geopolitical ramifications. As the US-China rivalry evolves, the fluidity and unpredictability of international relationships pose challenges for the region. The risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation remains significant as both powers safeguard their interests and respond to perceived threats.

This competition may spill over into other domains, such as cyberspace, outer space, and the governance of global commons, further complicating the geopolitical picture. Therefore, regional actors must carefully monitor development, engage in proactive diplomacy, and strive to maintain stability and prosperity amid the evolving landscape of power competition. The future of the Asia-Pacific region will be shaped by the intricate interplay of US-China competition and the strategic responses of regional states to this geopolitical challenge.

2.2 Gray Zone Tactics in the South China Sea

The issue of gray zone tactics in the South China Sea dispute emerged from long-standing territorial and maritime claims by multiple countries, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. Historically, the South China Sea has been a critical region for trade and strategic military positioning, leading to competing claims. China's claim, delineated by the "nine-dash line," encompasses a significant portion of the sea and overlaps with the Exclusive Economic Zones of several Southeast Asian countries. The discovery of vast natural resources, including oil and gas reserves, has intensified these territorial disputes.

One of the earliest notable incidents occurred in 1974 when the Paracel Islands were wrested from the Saigon regime. This confrontation resulted in a naval battle that led to the establishment of Chinese control over the Paracels. This remains a point of contention as Vietnam has never relinquished its claims of sovereignty over the islands. The situation in the South China Sea heated up again in 1988 with the Johnson South Reef skirmish on the Spratly Islands. This involved a deadly confrontation, resulting in the deaths of several Vietnamese sailors and the sinking of Vietnamese vessels. Subsequently, China established its presence on the reef, giving it a foothold on the Spratly Islands. This highlighted China's willingness to use force to assert its territorial claims and strained the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. The 2014 oil rig crisis marked another critical point in the South China Sea dispute. In May 2014, China deployed the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig in the waters claimed by Vietnam near the Paracel Islands.

This led to a tense standoff between Chinese and Vietnamese vessels, with numerous incidents of ramming and water cannon attacks. The deployment of the oil rig sparked widespread protests in Vietnam and severely strained bilateral relationships. A year before the oil rig crisis, the Philippines brought a case against China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), seeking a ruling on the legality of China's claims and actions in the South China Sea. In 2016, the PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines, stating that China's "nine-dash line" had no legal basis under the UNCLOS. Moreover, the Tribunal found that China's land reclamation activities caused severe environmental damage. However, China rejected the PCA's decision and maintained its claim.

The ongoing dispute is complicated by frequent incidents involving fishing vessels and coastal guards from various claimant countries. Chinese coastal guards, naval militias, fishing vessels, and other maritime forces have been accused of harassing and intimidating vessels of other nations. These actions are part of China's broader strategy of asserting control over the region through a combination of military presence, economic activities, and administrative measures. Currently, the South China Sea remains a highly contentious and militarized region. Despite international rule and regional protests, the continued construction and militarization of artificial islands by various parties have significantly altered its strategic landscape. Efforts to negotiate a COC between ASEAN countries and China have seen limited progress, reflecting the complexities and competing interests involved in the negotiations. The international community, particularly the US, continues to challenge China's claims through FONOPs and diplomatic efforts, advocating a rule-based order and peaceful resolution of disputes. However, the situation remains volatile, with the possibility of further escalation and significant regional and global security implications.

The tension surrounding the South China Sea has received significant attention in Vietnamese politics. The government's strategic documents, including the 2019 National Defense White Paper, frequently addressed the importance of safeguarding sovereignty and maintaining peace, security, FONOPs, and overflight. These topics are central to Vietnam's defense and foreign policy, emphasizing the need for diplomatic efforts, regional cooperation, and enhancing national defense capabilities to counteract the coercive actions of other states. Moreover, the South China Sea dispute has been a prominent subject of media coverage and analysis. The Vietnamese media regularly report incidents involving vessels of various countries in the region and developments in regional diplomacy, such as ASEAN's efforts to negotiate a COC with China. These reports are crucial in shaping public perception and awareness of ongoing territorial disputes and their impact on national security. Public debates, which are often facilitated by social media sites and online platforms, reflect widespread concern over sovereignty issues and the potential economic impact of maritime conflicts.

The population is highly engaged, frequently discussing the historical contexts of the disputes and expressing support for the government's stance on defending national interests. Some view FONOPs as deterrents to unilateral actions that can disrupt the balance of power and threaten international maritime law. This perspective is aligned with Vietnam's broader strategy of leveraging international law to counterbalance the assertive actions of other regional actors.[22] Analysts maintain that these operations have profound implications for regional geopolitics and global trade.[23]

In recent years, attention has intensified owing to China's expanding presence and activities in the South China Sea. The 2014 oil rig crisis marked a significant escalation and drew widespread media coverage and public protests in Vietnam. Over time, the increasing frequency of incidents and China's assertive actions in the region have made the South China Sea dispute a central topic in Vietnamese political discourse and public debate. Risk perceptions regarding the South China Sea are similar among various Vietnamese stakeholders. The government has consistently emphasized a balanced approach that combines diplomatic efforts, regional cooperation, and military preparedness. Its strategy involves safeguarding its sovereignty and national interests while avoiding direct military confrontation. This approach is based on a comprehensive understanding of geopolitical dynamics and prioritizing regional stability.

However, the gray zone tactics significantly threaten regional stability and adherence to international maritime law.[24] Vietnam perceives the use of gray zone tactics as a deliberate strategy to alter the status quo in the South China Sea without provoking a full-scale military conflict. These actions are attempts to incrementally change facts on the ground (or at sea) and undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations. Vietnam views these tactics as a violation of international law, particularly the UNCLOS,[25] which provides a legal framework for maritime activities and territorial claims. The Vietnamese government has consistently emphasized the importance of adhering to the UNCLOS and other international norms. This is evident in Vietnam's active participation in regional forums and efforts to rally support from the international community for a rule-based order in the South China Sea. In a recent statement, Vietnam reiterated the need for all parties to respect the 1982 UNCLOS for maritime activities. It considers this legal framework essential for maintaining peace, stability, and cooperation in the region.[26]

Foreign-policy experts and academics have analyzed the strategic implications of the disputes. They highlight the complexities of regional power dynamics, the role of international law, and the importance of multilateral frameworks, such as ASEAN, in managing conflicts. Moreover, they advocate for building strong regional alliances and enhancing maritime capabilities to deter coercive action by other states.

[22] Bienphong, "The importance of exercising maritime rights and freedom in the South China Sea," January 21, 2022. https://www.bienphong.com.vn/tam-quan-trong-cua-viec-thuc-hien-quyen-va-tu-do-hang-hai-o-bien-dong-post447604.html

[23] Vietnam News Agency, "Freedom of navigation in the South China Sea," July 30, 2024. https://vietnam.vnanet.vn/vietnamese/long-form/tu-do-hang-hai-tren-bien-dong-343073.html

[24] Nhandan.vn, "The Red Sea maritime crisis," February 2, 2024. https://nhandan.vn/cuoc-khung-hoang-hang-hai-tren-bien-do-post794863.html

[25] Vupc.monre.gov.vn, "40 years of development of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and Vietnam's active participation," April 19, 2023. https://vupc.monre.gov.vn/linh-vuc-bien-va-hai-dao/5450/40-nam-phat-trien-cong-uoc-luat-bien-cua-lien-hop-quoc-va-su-tham-gia-tich-cuc-cua-viet-nam

[26] Biengioilanhtho.gov.vn, "Countries need to comply with the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea in activities at sea," September 6, 2023. http://biengioilanhtho.gov.vn/vi/tin-tuc/cac-nuoc-can-tuan-thu-cong-uoc-luat-bien-nam-1982-trong-cac-hoat-dong-tren-bien-1089213.html

However, journalists and media commentators focus on specific incidents and their immediate impacts, providing detailed reports and analyses that shape public perception. Overall, there is a strong consensus regarding defending national sovereignty and maintaining a strategic and long-term orientation, focusing on stability and diplomatic engagement.

The South China Sea dispute is intricately linked to broader discussions on regional security and international maritime law, particularly the role of the UNCLOS. The 2016 ruling by the PCA rejected China's claim to historic waters within the "nine-dash line," arguing that the UNCLOS should be the cornerstone of a rules-based maritime order. This sparked ongoing discussions about how to defend and strengthen international law to ensure compliance by all nations. The challenge lies in effectively binding the actions of stronger powers to international norms.

The risk posed by the South China Sea dispute will remain significant and could increase nonlinearly in the coming years. China's assertive behavior in recent maritime incidents with the Philippines suggests that tensions will continue to persist. These actions underscore the strategic importance of the South China Sea, which serves as a major shipping route and a resource-rich area. The region's vast oil and natural gas reserves, and its abundant fisheries,[27] further complicate the geopolitical landscape as claimant states secure access to these valuable resources. This intractable situation necessitates ongoing vigilance and suitable responses from other claimant states, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and the broader international community.

The complex nature of the South China Sea dispute, with multiple overlapping territorial and maritime claims and the involvement of regional and external powers, creates a challenging environment for conflict resolution. China's assertion of its "nine-dash line" claim, which encompasses a vast majority of the South China Sea, directly conflicts with the claims of other states in the region, leading to increased tension and incidents. Moreover, the US's involvement in the dispute, driven by its strategic interest in maintaining FONOPs and countering China's growing influence, adds a layer of complexity to the situation. The risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation is heightened by the presence of multiple actors[28] with competing interests and the increasing frequency of military activity in the region.

However, expectations for the near future include sustained diplomatic efforts to manage and mitigate conflict. ASEAN has been actively negotiating with China to establish a COC for the South China Sea. A robust and enforceable COC will reduce the risk of miscalculation and promote peaceful resolution by providing a framework for dialogue, confidence-building, and dispute settlement. However, progress has been slower than

[27] US Energy Information Administration, "Independent statistics and analysis," March 21, 2024. https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/South_China_Sea

[28] Liam Reeves, "The South China Sea disputes: Territorial and maritime differences between the Philippines and China," Journal of Global Faultlines 6(1) (2019): 39–61. https://doi.org/10.13169/jglobfaul.6.1.0039

hoped[29] since the differing interests of ASEAN and China pose challenges in achieving a comprehensive agreement. Some ASEAN states have closer economic and political ties with China, which may influence their negotiation position. In addition, China's preference for bilateral negotiations and its reluctance to accept legally binding provisions in the COC could hinder the effectiveness of the agreement in addressing the underlying sources of tension.

International support for orders based on international law is essential to effectively manage the risks posed by the South China Sea dispute. This support can manifest through diplomatic pressure on claimant states to adhere to international law, economic sanctions against actors who violate these norms, and a coordinated military presence to ensure that FONOPs and overflight rights are respected. FONOPs can challenge excessive maritime claims and reaffirm the international law governing the use of the seas. However, it is important to balance deterrence and strategic reassurance to avoid unintended escalations. Engaging China through multilateral forums, such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum, can build trust and promote dialogue on maritime security issues. Overall, although the risk posed by the South China Sea dispute is likely to persist, a combination of diplomatic engagement, adherence to international norms, strategic reassurance, and deterrence can prevent its escalation and maintain regional peace and stability in the face of this complex geopolitical challenge.

2.3 Climate Change

Climate change has emerged as a significant threat to Vietnam's national security, with far-reaching implications for its socioeconomic stability, environmental sustainability, and regional cooperation. As a country with a long coastline, a significant portion of its population and economic activities are concentrated in low-lying areas.[30] Hence, Vietnam is particularly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change.

The Mekong subregion, which encompasses Vietnam and its neighboring countries, is susceptible to the impacts of climate change owing to its unique ecological and socioeconomic characteristics. The Mekong River is a vital water source in the region and supports the livelihood of millions through agriculture, fisheries, and energy production. However, rivers and their ecosystems are increasingly stressed by climate change,[31] which has exacerbated existing environmental challenges and introduced new threats. In the Mekong subregion, rising temperatures, altered rainfall patterns, and sea-level rise have led to frequent and severe droughts, floods, and storms. These extreme weather events have disrupted agricultural production and fisheries, damaged crops and infrastructure, and displaced communities,

[29] Ian Storey, "The code of conduct for the South China Sea: Movement in lieu of progress," Fulcrum, July 20, 2023. https://www.fulcrum.sg/the-code-of-conduct-for-the-south-china-sea-movement-in-lieu-of-progress/

[30] Asian Development Bank, "Viet Nam: Environment and climate change assessment," 2013. https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/33916/files/viet-nam-environment-climate-change.pdf

[31] World Bank Group and Asian Development Bank, "Climate risk country profile: Vietnam," 2021. https://www.climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/15077-Vietnam%20Country%20Profile-WEB.pdf

leading to increased migration and social tension. For instance, the 2019 drought in the Mekong Delta caused saltwater intrusion to extend inland, affecting over 50,000 ha of rice paddies and leaving farmers without a stable income. According to the Vietnam Country Climate and Development Report released by the World Bank in 2022, Vietnam lost approximately $10 billion (3.2% of its GDP) in 2020 because of climate change.[32] The broader economic impacts of climate change in Vietnam include damage to infrastructure, loss of productivity, and increased disaster-response and mitigation costs. The Vietnamese government has reported that climate-related disasters, such as typhoons and floods, have caused annual economic losses equivalent to 1–1.5% of the country's GDP.[33] These figures underscore the profound economic strain that climate change places on Vietnam.

Moreover, climate change has affected the unique biodiversity of the region, with rising water temperatures and altered flow patterns threatening the survival of aquatic species, including the iconic Mekong giant catfish. The loss of biodiversity has ecological consequences and affects the livelihoods and cultural heritage of communities that depend on these resources. Recognizing the critical importance of addressing climate change and its impact on the Mekong subregion, Vietnam has actively engaged in regional cooperative initiatives and promoted sustainable development practices. However, effectively tackling this complex challenge requires concerted efforts from all countries in the region and international support.

The impact of climate change on the Mekong subregion has been compounded by human activities, particularly the construction of upstream dams and water diversions. These projects,[34] driven by the growing energy demands of the rapidly developing economies of the region, have altered the natural flow of rivers, reduced sediment transport, and affected fish migration patterns. The resulting water availability and quality changes have had cascading effects on downstream communities, exacerbating the challenges posed by climate change. The cumulative impact of these dams, combined with the effects of climate change, poses difficulties for the long-term sustainability of the region's ecosystems and related livelihoods.

The current state of the Mekong subregion highlights the urgent need to address climate change and its multifaceted impacts. Vietnam, particularly the Mekong Delta, is one of the most vulnerable regions because of its low elevation and extensive reliance on agriculture. The delta is home to over 20 million people and produces more than half of Vietnam's rice output. It faces an existential threat from sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion. A recent study by the Vietnam Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment[35] projected that under a high-emission scenario, up to 40% of the delta could be submerged by the end of the century, displacing millions and jeopardizing the country's food security. The Vietnamese government

[32] Vietnamnet Global, "Approximately 6.8 per cent of Vietnam's GDP lost annually to climate change," August 8, 2023. https://vietnamnet.vn/en/approximately-6-8-per-cent-of-vietnam-s-gdp-lost-annually-to-climate-change-2174551.html

[33] Trungtamwto.vn, "Promoting Vietnam's direct investment in some Mekong sub-region countries," June 6, 2024. https://trungtamwto.vn/chuyen-de/17833-thuc-day-dau-tu-truc-tiep-cua-viet-nam-vao-mot-so-nuoc-tieu-vung-song-mekong

[34] Yadu Pokhrel, Mateo Burbano, Jacob Roush, Hyunwoo Kang, Venkataramana Sridhar, and David W. Hyndman, "A review of the integrated effects of changing climate, land use, and dams on Mekong River hydrology," Water 10(3) (2018): 266. https://doi.org/10.3390/w10030266

[35] VnExpress, "Facing donors, Vietnam urged to rethink coal-fueled growth," October 17, 2016. https://www.english.vov.vn/en/economy/facing-donors-vietnam-urged-to-rethink-coal-fueled-growth-334973.vov

has proactively recognized these threats, integrating climate change adaptation into national development plans and seeking international cooperation to enhance resilience. However, the scale and complexity of this challenge require sustained efforts and substantial investments in infrastructure, technology, and capacity building.

The efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change in the Mekong subregion involve national and regional initiatives. At the national level, Vietnam has developed a comprehensive legal and policy framework to address climate change, including the National Strategy on Climate Change and the National Target Program to Respond to Climate Change. These policies prioritize developing climate-resilient infrastructure, promoting sustainable land and water management practices, and strengthening early warning systems and disaster risk reduction capabilities. Additionally, Vietnam is investing in research and development to identify and scale up innovative solutions, such as using salt-tolerant rice varieties and applying nature-based approaches to coastal protection.

At the regional level, Vietnam has actively participated in various cooperative mechanisms, such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), to address the challenges posed by climate change and unsustainable development practices. The MRC, an intergovernmental organization established in 1995, promotes sustainable management and development of the Mekong River Basin. Through programs on climate change adaptation, flood and drought management, and environmental monitoring, the MRC enhances the resilience of riparian communities and ecosystems. Similarly, the LMC, launched in 2016, identified environmental protection and water resource management as key areas of cooperation among its member countries. By fostering dialogue, knowledge sharing, and joint projects, these regional platforms can build trust, mobilize resources, and coordinate actions to address the transboundary impacts of climate change.

The adverse effects of climate change on the Mekong subregion have garnered significant attention in Vietnamese politics as well. This is reflected in strategic national documents and policy frameworks that prioritize climate resilience and sustainable development. High-level political discourse frequently addresses the implications of climate change, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to mitigate its impacts. This is evident in the government's integration of climate adaptation measures into national development plans and its active participation in international climate agreements.[36] This underscores the need to recognize climate change as a critical factor influencing national security and socioeconomic stability.

[36] US Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, "International agreement to support Vietnam's ambitious climate and energy goals," December 15, 2022. https://vn.usembassy.gov/international-agreement-to-support-vietnams-ambitious-climate-and-energy-goals/

Furthermore, the Vietnamese media extensively covers this issue. News reports frequently highlight the challenges faced by communities in the Mekong Delta, such as saltwater intrusion, flooding, and declining agricultural productivity. They include personal stories and testimonies from the affected individuals, providing a human perspective on environmental crises. Additionally, media coverage extends to governmental and international efforts to combat climate change, highlighting Vietnam's initiatives and broader regional cooperation required to address these challenges. Public discussions on social media sites and other platforms reflect widespread concern and engagement with the issue, with citizens actively participating in conversations about environmental sustainability and the impact of climate change on their livelihoods.

The perception of and attention toward climate change in the Mekong subregion have evolved over the past decades. Initially, the focus was largely on localized environmental issues and their immediate impacts on agriculture and fisheries. However, as the scientific understanding of climate change has improved and its global implications have become apparent, there has been a shift toward recognizing the broader long-term impacts of climate change. This was particularly evident in the wake of extreme weather events, which highlighted the vulnerability of the Mekong Delta and underscored the need for comprehensive and strategic responses.

Security experts and academicians have highlighted the broader strategic implications of climate change, highlighting its potential to trigger conflicts over resources, induce large-scale migration, and undermine regional stability. They advocated for a comprehensive approach that combines scientific research, technological innovation, and regional cooperation to address the multifaceted nature of the threats. Their analyses stressed the need for robust early warning systems, enhanced disaster-response capabilities, and stronger international partnerships to build resilience against climate-related risks. In contrast, the public views climate change through its immediate and tangible impacts on daily life. Communities in the Mekong Delta, for example, are acutely aware of the effects of rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, and extreme weather events on their livelihood and well-being. These perceptions are shaped by personal experiences and are often voiced through grassroots campaigns and community-based initiatives[37] to promote environmental sustainability and resilience.

The risks posed by climate change, particularly in the Mekong subregion, are expected to remain significant and increase in the near future. Current trends in global climate patterns, coupled with the specific vulnerabilities of the Mekong Delta, suggest an increase in temperature, altered precipitation patterns, and increasing sea levels. These changes will exacerbate the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, posing direct threats to

[37] To Bich Ngoc, "Environmental volunteerism on the rise in Vietnam," PanNature, June 9, 2022. https://www.nature.org.vn/en/2022/06/environmental-volunteerism-on-the-rise-in-vietnam/

agricultural productivity, water resources, and the livelihoods of millions in the region. As a low-lying area, the Mekong Delta is especially susceptible to sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion, which could inundate significant portions of the delta by the end of the century. This would lead to substantial losses of arable land, decreased agricultural yields, and heightened food insecurity, with saltwater intrusion contaminating freshwater supplies that are already stressed by upstream damming and diversion.

Moreover, human activities, such as deforestation, dam construction, and unregulated industrialization, have compounded the climate change impact, reducing the region's natural resilience to environmental stressors. To address these challenges, Vietnam and other countries in the Mekong subregion must enhance their adaptive capacities and resilience. This involves implementing comprehensive climate adaptation strategies, improving the infrastructure to withstand extreme weather, adopting sustainable agricultural practices, and enhancing water management systems. Regional cooperation and international support are essential for addressing transboundary challenges and ensuring the sustainable management of the Mekong River's resources. While the threat of climate change persists, proactive and coordinated efforts can mitigate its impacts and safeguard the livelihoods of the people in the Mekong subregion.

III. Reflection and Prospects of Security Issues in Vietnam

Vietnam's approach to national security has been comprehensively outlined in several key official documents and strategies reflecting its multifaceted concerns and priorities. The 2019 National Defense White Paper served as the cornerstone of Vietnam's defense policy, clearly articulating the nation's strategic context and challenges. This underscores the necessity of a holistic approach to national defense that integrates military, economic, and environmental strategies to safeguard a country's interests. The White Paper emphasizes the importance of modernizing Vietnam's armed forces and enhancing their capabilities to respond to potential threats.

In addition to the National Defense White Paper, Vietnam's security priorities are reflected in the documents from the 13th Party Congress. These documents align the country's defense strategies with its broader socioeconomic development goals, recognizing the interdependence of security and prosperity. As pointed out in the 2021 book, Những điểm mới về an ninh quốc gia trong Văn kiện Đại hội XIII của Đảng (New Points on National Security in the 13th Party Congress' Documents),[38] the most recent documents stress the need to integrate defense and security considerations into all aspects of national planning, from infrastructure development to social policies. This integrated approach will bolster Vietnam's resilience to a spectrum of threats, including cyberattacks, terrorism, and transnational crime. Moreover, these documents highlighted the importance of strengthening regional and international cooperation in security matters, particularly in the context of the ASEAN community.

Vietnam's proactive stance on environmental security is evident in its National Strategy on Climate Change for 2050 and the National Target Program's response to climate change. These policies acknowledge the profound impact of climate change on Vietnam's national security, particularly in vulnerable regions, such as the Mekong Delta. They prioritize building climate resilience and promoting sustainable development practices to mitigate the risks posed by rising sea levels, frequent and intense natural disasters, and other climate-related challenges. Furthermore, they emphasize cross-sectoral and international cooperation to effectively address the complex transboundary nature of climate change.

The Mekong Delta is a focal point of Vietnam's environmental security concerns, given its critical role in the country's food security, economic development, and social stability. The region is highly vulnerable to climate change, including saltwater intrusion, flooding, and coastal erosion.

[38] Edited by the then Minister of Public Security, General Tô Lâm, currently the President of Vietnam.

Vietnam's climate change strategies recognize the urgency of implementing adaptation measures in the Mekong Delta, such as improving the water management infrastructure, promoting climate-smart agricultural practices, and strengthening early warning systems. The documents encourage the engagement of local communities and leveraging traditional knowledge for developing and implementing these measures.

3.1 Vietnam's Approach to the Indo-Pacific Concept

Vietnam's position on the Indo-Pacific concept has been cautious and pragmatic, reflecting its aim to maintain strategic autonomy and balance relationships with the major powers. Although Vietnamese policymakers have refrained from using the term "Indo-Pacific" in official foreign-policy discourse, preferring instead the more established term "Asia-Pacific," the concept has been indirectly referenced in certain policy documents,[39] connecting it to the broader security issues of the country.

Vietnam's approach to the Indo-Pacific concept can be described as open, albeit only under certain conditions. This is evident through its engagement with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which emphasizes ASEAN centrality, inclusivity, and an order based on international law. By supporting the AOIP, Vietnam signals its willingness to engage with the Indo-Pacific concept, provided it aligns with ASEAN's principles and does not undermine the organization's unity and centrality.

The 2019 National Defense White Paper explicitly addressed strategic competition between major powers, and used the term "Indo-Pacific region" within that context. This competition is viewed as a long-term threat that influences Vietnam's economic, technological, and military strategies. The White Paper highlighted the importance of maintaining a stable and secure Indo-Pacific region, advocating the peaceful resolution of disputes and adherence to international law, particularly in the South China Sea.

Vietnam's approach to the Indo-Pacific concept is guided by its foreign policy principles, which include independence, self-reliance, multilateralism, and diversifying external relationships. It seeks to promote a peaceful, stable, and inclusive regional order that upholds international law and respects the sovereignty and legitimate interests of all nations. In line with these principles, Vietnam has emphasized the importance of ASEAN centrality and unity in shaping the regional architecture, strongly supporting ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), as platforms for dialogue and cooperation on regional security and economic issues.

[39] Trinh Viet Dung and Dieu Huyen Ho, "Vietnam's Response to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Context of a Rising China."

Vietnam's participation in the AOIP reinforces its connection with the Indo-Pacific framework. Adopted in 2019 as a collective response to the evolving geopolitical landscape, the AOIP promotes an open, inclusive, and rule-based regional architecture that promotes cooperation in areas, such as maritime security, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic integration. Vietnam has actively contributed to developing and implementing the AOIP, demonstrating its strategic alignment with the Indo-Pacific Vision and its commitment to ASEAN's centrality in the regional order. However, while engaging with the Indo-Pacific concept, Vietnam has been cautious about aligning with any specific vision or strategy promoted by the major powers. It sought to maintain a harmonious approach toward its relationships with the US, China, Japan, India, and other key players in the region, avoiding actions that could be perceived as taking sides. This balanced approach is evident in its official discourse, which emphasizes the importance of upholding international law, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations.

3.2 Actors Involved in Strategy Development and Implementation

In Vietnam, developing and implementing national security strategies involves a complex network of actors, with the Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of Public Security, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs forming the "three pillars" (ba chân kiềng) of national security. These ministries collaborate with each other and other governmental bodies to address the country's multifaceted security challenges.

This close coordination underscores the country's recognition of the interconnected nature of traditional and non-traditional security challenges and the need for a holistic approach to addressing them. By leveraging the expertise and resources of these ministries and other relevant governmental bodies, Vietnam aims to develop and implement effective strategies to safeguard its national interests and maintain a stable and secure environment. At the regional level, Vietnam actively engages with ASEAN to shape its regional security architecture and promote a rule-based, inclusive Indo-Pacific order. ASEAN is a key platform for Vietnam to advance its security interests and collaborate with other member states regarding common challenges. Through mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus, which include eight dialogue partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the US), Vietnam participates in discussions on regional security issues, such as maritime security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. These forums provide an opportunity for Vietnam to share its perspective, build trust, and enhance practical cooperation with its regional partners.

However, ASEAN member states' involvement in regional security discussions is not always uniform because each country has its unique set of interests and strategic calculations. Some ASEAN member states, particularly those with closer economic and political ties to China, may be more cautious in their approach to certain security issues, such as the South China Sea dispute, to avoid jeopardizing their relationship with Beijing. This dynamic can lead to a lack of consensus within ASEAN and limit the organization's ability to take decisive action on sensitive security matters. To overcome these challenges, Vietnam has sought to diversify its partnerships and engage with other regional and global powers through bilateral and multilateral frameworks, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, to balance its relationships and hedge against potential risks.

3.3 Ongoing Efforts and Further Opportunities for Collaboration

From Vietnam's perspective, several collaborative measures are being pursued in the Indo-Pacific region to address the aforementioned security issues, such as strategic competition among major powers, territorial disputes, and non-traditional security threats. These measures included joint military training and exercises, dialogue platforms, agreements, and diplomatic efforts. A key collaboration area is Vietnam's participation in regional security forums and mechanisms, particularly those led by the ASEAN. The ADMM and ADMM-Plus are important platforms for dialogue and cooperation on regional security issues. Through these forums, Vietnam engages in discussions and practical cooperation with other ASEAN member states and external partners on topics, such as maritime security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and peacekeeping. For example, Vietnam participated in the ADMM-Plus Maritime Security Field Training Exercise to enhance interoperability and capacity building among regional navies to address common maritime security challenges.

Furthermore, Vietnam actively participates in other ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the EAS and the ARF, which provide dialogue and confidence-building opportunities among Indo-Pacific countries. These forums allow Vietnam to express its concerns, share its perspectives, and build a consensus on regional security issues and the need for a rule-based and inclusive regional order. Vietnam has strengthened its defense and security cooperation with various Indo-Pacific countries through joint military training, exercises, and agreements. For instance, Vietnam and the US have conducted regular naval engagements, such as port visits and joint exercises,[40] to enhance maritime domain awareness and interoperability. In 2019, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on

[40] US Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, "USS Blue Ridge and USCGC Waesche arrive in Cam Ranh, Vietnam," July 10, 2023. https://vn.usembassy.gov/uss-blue-ridge-and-uscgc-waesche-arrive-in-cam-ranh-vietnam/

Promoting Defense Cooperation to deepen collaboration in areas, such as humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, peacekeeping operations, and maritime security. Similarly, Vietnam has expanded its defense ties with other regional powers, such as Japan, Australia, and India, through bilateral dialogues, training programs, and capacity-building initiatives.[41],[42],[43]

To further enhance collaboration on security issues in the Indo-Pacific region, Vietnam should explore various forms of cooperation with regional and extra-regional partners. These collaborative efforts could focus on addressing common security challenges, promoting confidence-building measures, and enhancing capacity-building in areas, such as maritime security, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations.

A potential avenue for cooperation is minilateral engagements with like-minded partners within ASEAN. By working closely with selected ASEAN member states that share similar concerns and interests, Vietnam can initiate focused dialogues and joint initiatives to address specific security issues. Such minilateral cooperation would complement existing ASEAN-led mechanisms and provide a targeted platform for addressing sensitive security matters while maintaining ASEAN centrality and unity. Another opportunity for collaboration is engaging with multilateral frameworks that align with Vietnam's strategic interests and priorities. For example, Vietnam could actively participate in the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), a multilateral framework proposed by India that focuses on seven pillars of cooperation – maritime security; maritime ecology; maritime resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology, and academic cooperation; trade, connectivity, and maritime transport. By contributing to the IPOI and shaping its agenda, Vietnam could benefit from enhanced cooperation and capacity building in areas critical to its security and development, while promoting an inclusive and balanced approach to regional cooperation.

Furthermore, Vietnam could strengthen its cooperation with the European Union (EU) and its member states as they have shown increasing interest and engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. Deepening dialogue and collaboration with the EU on issues of maritime security, climate change, and sustainable development could provide Vietnam with valuable opportunities to diversify its partnerships, access partners' expertise and resources, and address regional security challenges from a broader perspective.

In pursuing these collaborative measures, Vietnam should remain committed to the principles of independence, self-reliance, and diversification of external relationships. By engaging with a wide range of partners in a balanced and pragmatic manner, both within and beyond the

[41] Sebastian Strangio, "Vietnam, Japan establish comprehensive strategic partnership," The Diplomat, November 1, 2023. https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/vietnam-japan-establish-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/

[42] Ministry of National Defence, "Vietnam to enhance defense ties with Australia," July 11, 2023. https://mod.gov.vn/en/event/detail?current=true&urile=wcm:path:/mod/sa-mod-en/sa-en-news/sa-en-news-rela/6ab80611-0297-4bf7-94a1-47f61fb1b8ff

[43] Mandeep Singh, "India, Vietnam deepen defense partnership to confront regional challenges," Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, April 6, 2024. https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/04/india-vietnam-deepen-defense-partnership-to-confront-regional-challenges/

Indo-Pacific region, Vietnam can effectively navigate the complex security landscape and contribute to a stable, inclusive, and rule-based regional order without being perceived as aligned with any particular power bloc.