From Bandwagoning to Hedging: Domestic Sources of Vietnam's China Policy Since 1990

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How to Cite: Li, Z. (2025). From bandwagoning to hedging: Domestic sources of Vietnam's China policy since 1990. *Journal of ASEAN Studies, 13*(2), 257-287. https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v13i2.14233

Abstract

Although much has been written on Vietnam's China policy, few studies provide a holistic account of *how* and *why* it has evolved since the end of the Cold War. Drawing on a two-level neoclassical realism framework, this paper offers a comprehensive analysis of Vietnam's China policy from 1990 to 2024. It finds that Vietnam's policy evolved from bandwagoning toward China to heavy hedging, a trajectory shaped by the interaction of systemic factors and domestic political dynamics. By conceptualizing hedging, this research provides a clear and operational distinction between light and heavy hedging and derives Vietnam's hedging behavior accordingly. Furthermore, by introducing factional politics as an intervening variable, this research challenges the conventional perception of the Vietnamese Communist Party as a unitary actor. Instead, the Politburo, Vietnam's highest decision-making body, functions as a coalition of factional representatives, with the continual convergence and divergence of interests among competing political factions directly shaping the country's China policy. This research highlights the need for future research to consider the influence of intra-party factional politics on foreign policy. By analyzing the evolution of Vietnam's China policy through the lens of factional politics as an intervening variable in neoclassical realism, this study enriches the theory and provides a new operational perspective for the study of small-state foreign policies.

Keywords: Vietnam's China policy, factional politics, neoclassical realism, light hedging, heavy hedging

Introduction

Vietnam's relationship with China has long been characterized by asymmetry (Womack, 2006). Over two millennia of continuous interaction, China and Vietnam experienced cycles of conquest and resistance, yet neither fully annexed the other. Instead,

Journal of ASEAN Studies, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2025), pp. 257–287
P-ISSN 2338-1361/ E-ISSN 2338-1353
Received: 18th August 2025/ Revised: 5th October 2025/ Accepted: 15th October 2025

they came to share a broader and overlapping historical legacy. In the three decades since the end of the Cold War, Vietnam's power disparities and geographical proximity *vis-à-vis* China have been repeatedly exposed amid rapid geopolitical transformations. At the same time, China commands far greater economic resources, political influence, and military capabilities, Vietnam-though a smaller state-has been compelled to navigate the challenges posed by this enduringly imbalanced and asymmetric relationship. How to navigate the mixture of challenges and opportunities posed by its northern neighbor, Vietnam's China policy in the post-Cold War has stimulated numerous scholar debates.

Over the past two decades, scholars have highlighted multiple strategic orientations in Vietnam's China policy. Some scholars emphasize Hanoi's efforts to either accommodate China's rise (Ross, 2006) or to balance against it by enhancing military capabilities or deepening engagement with the United States (U.S.) and its allies (Liff, 2016; Aswani, 2024). Others, to a lesser degree, argue that Vietnam and China have reached a *modus vivendi* (Ma & Kang, 2023) or 'normalcy' (Womack, 2006), which enables Vietnam to manage disputes with China. Building on these debates, the concept of hedging has gained prominence in the literature over the last two decades. Tran et al. (2013) describe hedging as a twofold strategy: engaging China to repair and deepen relations while counterbalancing Chinese ambitions through diversification with other regional powers. Dewey (2017) echoes this, portraying hedging as strategic flexibility lying between deference and defiance. Le (2013a) identifies four components—economic pragmatism, direct engagement, hard balancing, and soft balancing—while Tran and Sato (2018) decompose hedging into diplomatic engagement, economic engagement, soft balancing, and hard balancing. More recently, studies of Vietnam's infrastructure cooperation show that partnering with other states, notably Japan, offsets dependence on China while avoiding domestic anti-China backlash (Liao & Dang, 2019). Despite minor definitional variations, the argument that Vietnam has hedged against China since normalization in the 1990s has gained increasing scholarly acceptance.

Nevertheless, this research begins with doubts about treating hedging as a *Panacea*. Was Vietnam truly hedging against China in the late 1990s? If the normalization of relations with the U.S. and joining ASEAN are to be understood as multilateral hedging moves to avoid greater dependence on China (Le, 2013a), then why did Hanoi at that time exercise maximum restraint and silence over its sovereignty claims, and eventually made substantially higher degree of agreement in bilateral negotiations on the land border with China? Such progress stands in sharp contrast to Vietnam's conduct over the past decade, when it has persistently sought to enmesh its maritime border disputes in multilateral negotiation frameworks (Do, 2016a). Is economic hedging truly aimed at safeguarding regime security? If hedging is meant to diversify economic partnerships with regional powers in order to resist dependence on China or to avoid inflaming anti-China sentiment that could erode the elites' political legitimacy (Liao & Dang, 2019), then why did Hanoi still cede bauxite development to China (Marston, 2012) despite facing intensified nationalist petitions at home? Similarly, is military hedging truly aimed at securing national sovereignty? If continuous military modernization constitutes a hard balancing to deter China (Le, 2013a) or an auxiliary revenue to bolster Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) legitimacy (Dung & Ho, 2022), then why did Vietnam's military modernization program stagnate after 2016? (Nguyen, 2021). Moreover, why is the multilateral defense diplomacy so late in arriving in Asia? (Capie, 2013).

Significant gaps and contradictions remain in explaining both *how* and *why* Vietnam hedges. Regarding *how* it hedges, or even whether it is genuine hedging, the existing literature often neglects Hanoi's conspicuous and enthusiastic accommodation of Beijing. Determining whether Vietnam is truly hedging, when this behavior became more pronounced, and how its post–Cold War China policy evolved all require systematic and historically grounded reassessment. On the question of *why*, external, structural, or systemic factors—such as 'mature asymmetry' (Womack, 2006), geographic proximity (Thayer, 2011; Ba & Kuik, 2018) or historical legacies (Yao, 2025) —cannot fully account for Hanoi's policy-decision behavior. Similarly, relying solely on domestic political narratives, such as safeguarding regime security (Liu & Sun, 2015) or VCP's political legitimacy (Dung & Ho, 2022) cannot fully explain for Vietnam's apparently irrational diplomatic practices either. Instances include the bauxite case as well as its voluntary withdrawal from joint oil exploration projects in the South China Sea under Chinese pressure. Such deferential posture further undermines regime stability and potentially erodes the VCP's political legitimacy.

Meanwhile, most studies of Southeast Asian foreign policy assume the state is a unitary rational actor, overlooking how foreign policies often deviate from rationalist expectations (Vuving, 2025). In Vietnam's case, the state—or more precisely, the VCP—is frequently portrayed as a unified, rational decision-maker. Increasingly few international relations scholars examine how internal divergences, interest trade-offs, and the 'push and pull' among different factions within the VCP shape the state foreign policy decisions. Over the past decade, the increasing uniformity, opacity, and officialization of Vietnamese news sources have further sealed the country's domestic politics into the 'black box,' or, as Vuving (2025) puts it, a 'rich tapestry,' where analyses often reflect scholars' own perspectives and preferences. These are producing fundamental misunderstandings because Vietnam's diplomats are polished, erudite, and share many of the concerns that the West has about China, but they are not policymakers (Abuza, 2025).

This research advances a novel argument by incorporating factional politics into the analysis of Vietnam's foreign policy. It seeks to address both *how* and *why* Vietnam's China policy has evolved to its current form. This research differs from most existing research on hedging in two major respects. First, it constructs a two-level analytical framework grounded in Neoclassical Realism (NCR) that integrates both structural factors and domestic political variables. Second, this research covers over three decades of Sino-Vietnamese relations to provide a comprehensive and dynamic account of the evolution of Vietnam's China policy. By reviewing four phases, this research unveils that Vietnam's China policy shifted from bandwagoning toward hedging. Following the introduction, the second section reviews existing literature on hedging and offers a conceptual discussion. It defines hedging in straightforward terms as a form of alignment behavior and further distinguishes between light and heavy hedging by assessing the differential use of economic, political, and military instruments. The third section reviews neoclassical realism (NCR) in foreign policy analysis and develops a two-level NCR framework tailored to Vietnam's specific context. This framework incorporates both systemic factors (historical legacies, asymmetric power, and structural uncertainties) and domestic factors (factional politics), and it is operationalized through qualitative research methods. The fourth section presents the empirical analysis on four phases to elucidate the evolution of Vietnam's foreign policy and its hedging behaviors. The fifth and final section concludes by summarizing the key findings of this paper.

Conceptualizing Hedging

Hedging has emerged as a prominent concept in addressing key questions in contemporary international relations (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). The earliest empirical studies of hedging appeared in the Asia-Pacific, where it was used to analyze how regional or secondary states responded to China's potential rise (Roy, 2005; Goh, 2005). Over time, the concept has been exported to studies of Europe, South Asia, and beyond (Toje, 2010; Boon, 2016; Korolev, 2016), while research on Southeast Asia's hedging has developed most rapidly, producing increasingly multidimensional findings.

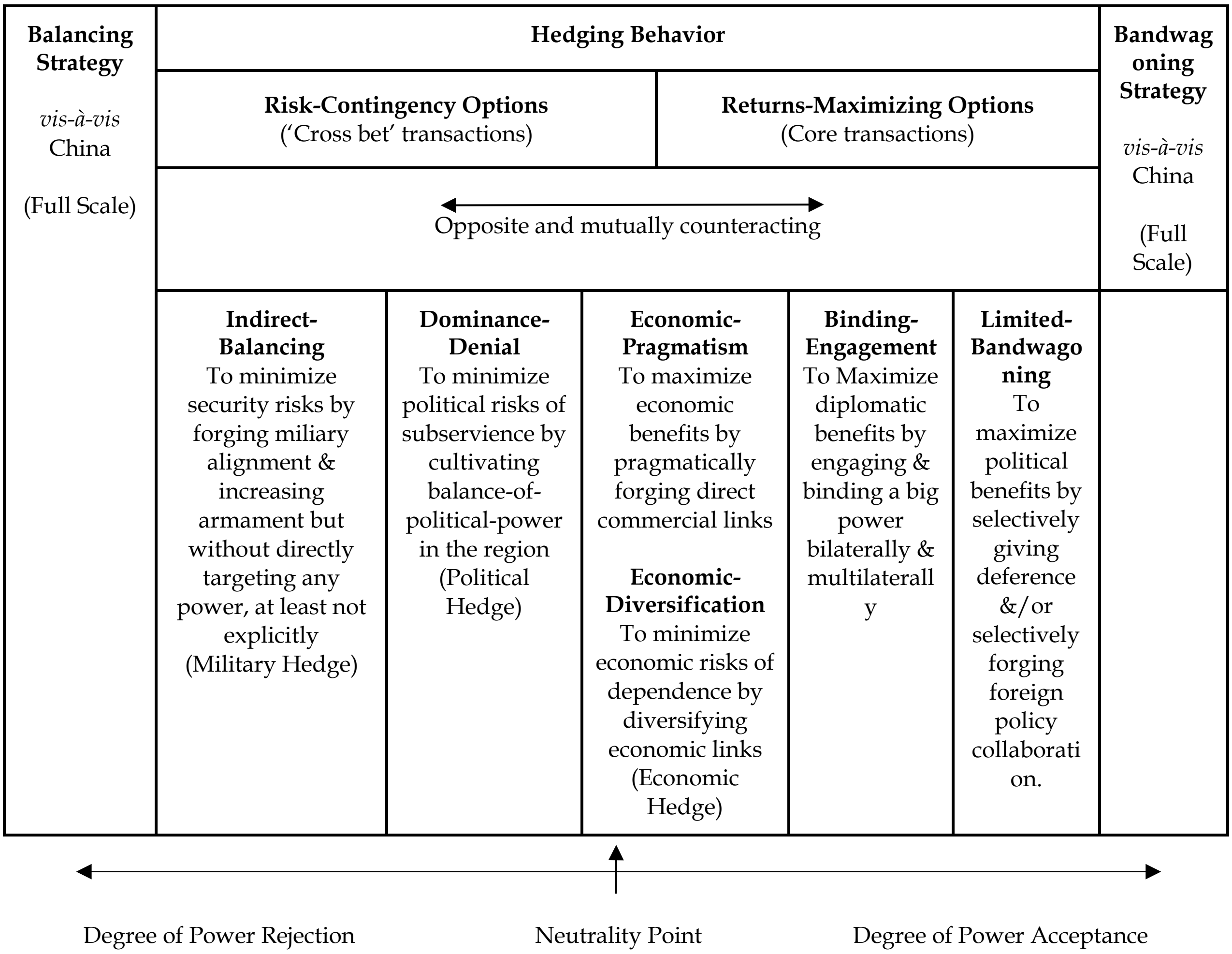
Although individual scholars vary in their dimensions of hedging, numerous studies argue that hedging consists of a set of varied and diversified engagements rather than a single policy, which constructs the first dimension of hedging. For instance, hedging is emphasized as a means of securing economic benefits while mitigating security risks (Chung, 2004). In the analysis of Sino-U.S. relations, Mederiros (2005) describes hedging as one hand pursuing stress-engagement and integration mechanisms, while the other hand emphasizing realist-style balancing. Jackson (2014) views hedging as a mix of opposing or contradictory actions. Koga (2018) envisages hedging as combining elements of balancing and bandwagoning, including 'conventional hedging,' which blends 'military balancing' and 'economic bandwagoning.' Le (2013a), on the other hand, proposes hard balancing as a key component of hedging. There is general agreement that risk management is central to hedging behavior (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2022). For instance, hedging is presented as a means of risk management aimed at maximizing policy autonomy and minimizing provocation of great powers (Lim & Cooper, 2015). Hedging has also been interpreted as a way to avoid the risks associated with balancing or bandwagoning (Koga, 2018; Jackson, 2014) and to offset a wide range of risks stemming from high uncertainty (Kuik, 2020; Lai & Kuik, 2020). In the same vein, hedging is also useful to be applied for manage risks (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019).

The second dimension of hedging is its relation to alignment choices. Hedging has also been treated as a limited and ambiguous alignment choice, or as a trade-off between autonomy and alignment, pursued by small or secondary states in their engagement with one or more major powers (Kuik, 2016; Lim & Cooper, 2015). Hedging has also been regarded as a means to pursue non-alignment (Fiori & Passeri, 2015). A step further, hedging is often debated over whether it constitutes a strategy. Most scholarly accounts explicitly refer to hedging as a strategy (Le, 2013a; Korolev, 2019; Tran & Sato, 2018). However, in his study of trilateral relations between the U.S., Japan, and Australia, John Hemmings, through observations of domestic policy struggles, illustrates that hedging is not a coherent strategy but rather an inefficient outcome produced by contradictory policy impulses (Hemmings, 2017). In a similar vein, Jones and Jenne (2021) argue that hedging presupposes a rationally calculated policy guided by empirical logic, which is not evident in the practice of many secondary states. Instead, they suggest that hedging is merely a contingent adjustment to events, changing domestic and international agendas, essentially an exercise of reactive prudence.

Although hedging concepts have been employed into empirical case studies, analyses that overemphasize structural factors as the primary drivers of hedging—such as in the case of Vietnam—fail to adequately account for contradictions and seemingly irrational actions in state behavior. In contrast, arguments that identify the primary driver of hedging as the ruling elites' desire to secure domestic legitimacy (Kuik, 2008, 2013, 2021a) provide a more nuanced explanation of how and why state hedge. While structural conditions help explain when states hedge, domestic politics elucidate why they do so (Kuik, 2024). Other case studies, including Vietnam's cautious response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are due to the interpretation of VCP's domestic authority and legitimacy needs (Pham & Ba, 2021). Hedging bolsters the legitimacy of Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (Lee, 2024) and autocratic rulers in Cambodia and Myanmar could choose to cease hedging and opt for closer alignment with China for their domestic legitimation reasons (Marston, 2023)

Drawing on the rich hedging literature, this research defines hedging as an alignment behavior that fluctuates between bandwagoning and balancing. This definition of hedging is inspired by Kuik's conceptualization of small-state alignment behaviors. Kuik (2016) defines hedging as an insurance-seeking behavior undertaken under conditions of high stakes and high uncertainty. According to Kuik (2016), hedging involves three elements: (a) an insistence on not taking sides among competing powers, (b) the practice of adopting opposite and counteracting measures, and (c) the use of these opposite acts as instruments to pursue the goals of preserving gains while cultivating a fallback position. While Kuik emphasizes the constitute components of hedging—its contradictory and mutually counteracting nature—this research focuses on the behavioral manifestation of hedging. In other words, Kuik explains *what* hedging consists of, whereas this research underscores and operates on *how* hedging is enacted and experienced over time. By integrating these perspectives, this research provides a fuller understanding of hedging as both a set of alignment behaviors and a series of observable action–reaction patterns.

This research's empirical analysis adopts Kuik's (2016) operational framework of small-state alignment behavior to explain *how* Vietnam hedges China. His two-pronged and oppositional approach, with a five-component composition of hedging, provides a clear operational framework for measuring and comparing the constituent elements of different actors' alignment behaviors, including their nuances, limits, and prospects across countries and over time (see Figure 1). Moreover, Kuik's framework is useful for capturing the varying degrees and modes of hedging implementation, distinguishing variations of actors as heavy or light hedgers. According to the degree of emphasis on risk-contingency measures, heavy hedgers are more concerned with potential risks embedded in uncertain great-power relations and thus are more inclined than light hedgers to invest in both political and military hedging (Kuik & Rozman, 2016). Building on Kuik's constitute distinction between heavy and light hedger, this research operationalizes at the behavioral level. Behaviors dominated by political and military hedging, or a mix of different behaviors are defined as heavy hedging, whereas actions that rely on less or simple behaviors are classified as light hedging.



<table>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Balancing Strategy
<i>vis-à-vis</i> China
(Full Scale)</td><td colspan="5">Hedging Behavior</td><td rowspan="3">Bandwagoning Strategy
<i>vis-à-vis</i> China
(Full Scale)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Risk-Contingency Options
(‘Cross bet’ transactions)</td><td colspan="3">Returns-Maximizing Options
(Core transactions)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="5">Opposite and mutually counteracting</td></tr>
<tr><td>Indirect-Balancing
To minimize security risks by forging miliary alignment & increasing armament but without directly targeting any power, at least not explicitly
(Military Hedge)</td><td>Dominance-Denial
To minimize political risks of subservience by cultivating balance-of-political-power in the region
(Political Hedge)</td><td>Economic-Pragmatism
To maximize economic benefits by pragmatically forging direct commercial links
Economic-Diversification
To minimize economic risks of dependence by diversifying economic links
(Economic Hedge)</td><td>Binding-Engagement
To Maximize diplomatic benefits by engaging & binding a big power bilaterally & multilaterally</td><td>Limited-Bandwagoning
To maximize political benefits by selectively giving deference &/or selectively forging foreign policy collaboration.</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Figure 1. Power-Response Spectrum (Kuik, 2016)

A Neoclassical Realism Framework: Factional Politics as an Intervening Variable

This research builds on a two-level analytical framework grounded in neoclassical realism (NCR) to explain *why* Vietnam's China policy has evolved to its current form. As mentioned in the first section, to address the conundrum and puzzle of hedging or non-hedging behaviors—and to avoid relying solely on either structural or domestic narratives in explaining foreign policy—this research tackles both the enduring structural constraints facing Vietnam and the dynamic evolving domestic politics, which together inform the country's decision making preference. In this regard, the NCR framework serves as an ideal theoretical lens to fill these explanatory gaps.

NCR bridges systemic-level and domestic-level analyses of foreign policy, refining Waltz's (1979) structural realism by emphasizing the mediating role of domestic factors. Rose (1998) first articulated NCR as an approach that acknowledges the primacy of systemic pressures—particularly relative material power capabilities—while recognizing that the translation of these pressures into policy is filtered through domestic contexts. From a methodological perspective, Rose (1998) identifies systemic incentives and internal factors as independent and intervening variables, respectively, thereby establishing a preliminary operational analytical framework that has guided subsequent research. A key feature of NCR theory lies in its exploration of domestic factors. As NCR theory and related studies have developed, unit-level variables—such as domestic political institutions, individual leaders, strategic cultures, public pressures on decision-makers, bureaucratic processes, and socio-human factors, nationalism—have been increasingly identified and analyzed. Following Ripsman et al.'s (2016) comprehensive development of NCR theory and methodology, the theoretical framework became more operational, encompassing systemic factors as independent variables, domestic factors as intervening variables, and foreign policy as the dependent variable. Accordingly, applying NCR to the study of Vietnam's foreign policy requires identifying and operationalizing of corresponding variables.

Before constructing the NCR analytical framework for Vietnam scenario, a more in-depth assessment of existing Vietnam's China policy literature is essential. Building on the guiding discussion of research contradictions and gaps presented in the introduction section, the review in this part will move further to illustrate the limitations of existing studies. Existing scholarship on Vietnam's China policy can be broadly categorized into three main strands. The first strand consists of historical-legacy and event-interpretation accounts. These studies emphasize the millennium of Chinese imperial control (Kang, 2003; Vuving, 2009), the Cold War experience (Womack, 2006), anti-Chinese nationalist sentiments (Vu, 2014b), and detailed episodes in bilateral relations (Ross, 2021; Thayer, 2016; Chapman, 2017). While primarily descriptive rather than anchored in theoretical international relations analysis, these works nonetheless provide rich secondary data and valuable insights into Vietnam's China policy. The second strand highlights systemic, structural, or regional narratives shaping Vietnam's approach to China. Such studies typically stress "China factors" including geographical proximity (Thayer, 2011; Do, 2016b; Hoang & Do, 2016), China's rise, assertiveness, and coercion (Thayer, 2008; Trinh, 2025), economic investments (Vu et al., 2020), and wedge strategies (Vu, 2023). Collectively, these external dynamics compel Vietnam to adopt a range of responses, such as balancing, hedging, bandwagoning, engagement, and omni-enmeshment. However, this body of research tends to overstate the role of external determinants while neglecting—or, at times, deliberately sidestepping—Vietnam's domestic political narratives. Last, several studies have drawn attention to Vietnam's domestic factors, including domestic agenda (Le, 2013b), nationalism (Hoang, 2019), the political legitimacy of the authoritarian state (Thayer, 2009; Pham & Ba, 2021; Dung & Ho, 2022), and regime security (Liu & Sun, 2015). However, as noted earlier, these works fall short in underlining the irrational acts of domestic politics. Besides, much of the literature treats the VCP and the state as a unitary actor, thereby overlooking the fragmented and contested nature of foreign policy decision-making. As a result, these studies are unable to convincingly account for the fluctuations, nor are they willing to acknowledge the inherent inconsistency in Vietnam's decision making.

Building on the gaps identified and leveraging the strengths of NCR, this paper defines an NCR analytical framework to explain why Vietnam has adopted its China policy. In this framework, the independent variables include three factors: historical legacies, asymmetric power capabilities, and structural uncertainties; the intervening variable is factional politics, and the dependent variable is Vietnam's China policy outcome (see Figure 2).

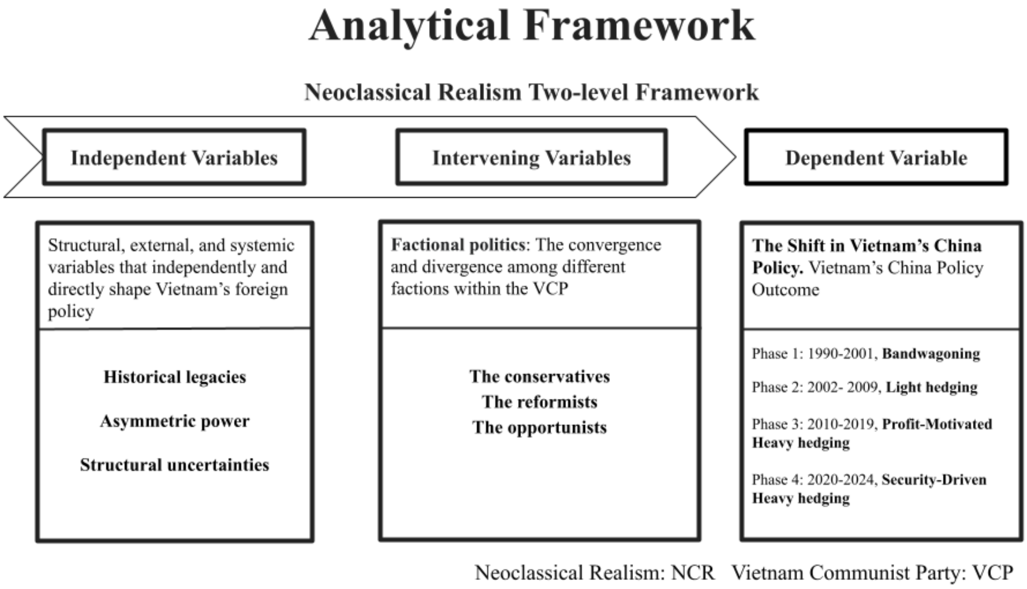

Analytical Framework
Neoclassical Realism Two-level Framework
Independent Variables
Intervening Variables
Dependent Variable
Structural, external, and systemic variables that independently and directly shape Vietnam's foreign policy
Historical legacies
Asymmetric power
Structural uncertainties
Factional politics: The convergence and divergence among different factions within the VCP
The conservatives
The reformists
The opportunists
The Shift in Vietnam's China Policy. Vietnam's China Policy Outcome
Phase 1: 1990-2001, Bandwagoning
Phase 2: 2002- 2009, Light hedging
Phase 3: 2010-2019, Profit-Motivated Heavy hedging
Phase 4: 2020-2024, Security-Driven Heavy hedging
Neoclassical Realism: NCR   Vietnam Communist Party: VCP

Figure 2: Analytical Framework

(Source: author)

As for the independent variables, historical legacies are a crucial factor shaping Vietnam's strategic worldview and foreign policy orientation. As Womack (2006) notes, 'there is no country more similar to China than Vietnam, and there is no country more similar to Vietnam than China.' Centuries of Chinese imperial domination, interspersed with conflict and uneasy coexistence, have left a profound imprint on Vietnam's perception of China as both a potential threat and partner. Meanwhile, the 1979 war launched by China against Vietnam during the Cold War provided a harsh lesson, deeply influencing Vietnam's shift from an alliance-oriented to a non-alignment policy (Zhang, 2015). This collective memory of invasions, coupled with enduring cultural and ideological exchanges, informs Hanoi's complicated approach toward Beijing, shaping both threat perception and diplomatic strategy. Within the NCR framework, historical legacies function as an independent variable, representing an enduring systemic pressure on Vietnam's foreign policy decisions.

Asymmetric power capabilities with China constitute another critical structural certainty. China's overwhelming economic and military capabilities, combined with its pervasive political and cultural influence, place Vietnam in a vulnerable and difficult-to-counter position. This asymmetry is enduring and resistant to change, representing a structural reality. From a neoclassical realist perspective, asymmetric capabilities function as independent variables by generating direct systemic pressures that compel state responses.

Structural uncertainty is not a static condition but rather a dynamic one that evolves across different periods, profoundly shaping Vietnam's threat and opportunity perceptions of surrounding international environment. Structural uncertainty is not a static but a dynamic variable defined in terms of three distinct phases. The first phase, roughly from 1990 to 2000, was characterized by uncertainty over whether the collapse of the Cold War bipolar order would threaten the survival of communist regimes. The second phase, spanning approximately 2002 to 2009, reflected uncertainties over whether confrontation with the capitalist camp was unwinnable and whether economic development through global integration was more important than adherence to class struggle. The third phase, beginning in 2010 and continuing to the present, has been marked by uncertainty arising from China's rapid rise and the intensification of great power rivalry. These rapid transformations in international politics may either constrain Vietnam's strategic space as a small state (Korolev, 2019) or, conversely, provide it with greater room for maneuver (Kuik, 2021b). Given the critical importance of such shifting external dynamics, this paper treats great power rivalry as another independent variable, as it constitutes the fundamental external environment within which Vietnam must secure its survival.

As an intervening variable, factional politics has been significantly underestimated—or almost entirely overlooked—in studies of Vietnam's relations with China. Political science scholars on Vietnam topic have consistently emphasized that Vietnam is governed by an authoritarian communist regime in which the VCP exercises direct control over all policy areas (Vu, 2014a), representing the fundamental political reality in the country. However, most political science studies focus primarily on domestic politics and rarely examine foreign policy. In the realm of international relations study, perhaps Pham and Ba's (2021) study of Vietnam's response to China's BRI, which draw on Kuik's (2021a) framework of political legitimacy, is a notable attempt to link Vietnam's domestic politics to its foreign policy. However, their BRI analysis typically overlooks a crucial insight from political scientists and historians: the VCP is not monolithic—factions exist, and they have been present since the Party's founding (Trinh, 2020).

If insights from political science regarding internal factional struggles within the VCP are more closely integrated into analyses of Vietnam's foreign policy decision-making, scholars could more accurately identify the underlying factors driving Vietnam's policy shifts. In other words, while the VCP's pursuit of legitimacy might shape its policy-making (both domestic and foreign), the critical question is: who determines how this legitimacy is constructed? This research argues that the convergence and divergence of interests among party factions directly influence how legitimacy is framed and, consequently, intervene in the process of Vietnam's foreign policy choices. Therefore, factional struggles provide a deeper explanation for how the VCP establishes and maintains its legitimacy, which in turn affects both domestic and foreign policy formulation. In short, political legitimacy is the surface, while factional struggle lies beneath. Historical studies of pro-Soviet versus pro-Chinese factions within the VCP illuminate, from a historical perspective, the factors driving Hanoi's approach during the Vietnam War era (Nguyen, 2012; You, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of factional analysis for interpreting Vietnam's policy behavior. Unfortunately, after the Cold War, these internal factional struggles have received little scholarly attention; incorporating factional politics into international relations analysis remains rare, often treated as a "black box" due to its obscurity, lack of sources, and absence of standardized definitions.

Thus, one of the innovations of this paper is to treat factional politics as an intervening variable, bringing it back to the analytical table and allowing for more detailed observation of the deeper nature of Vietnamese decision-making processes.

Further, this research defines the nature and characteristics of Vietnam's factional politics to render its analysis as an intervening variable more operational. Factional politics in Vietnam refers to the dynamic interplay of competing and cooperating interests among different party factions within the VCP. The convergence and divergence of these interests determine how the party's legitimacy is framed and exercised, which, in turn, influences foreign policy outcomes. VCP factions are not static; they continuously evolve, negotiate, converge, or diverge depending on specific policies, ideological positions, personal interests, and bureaucratic affiliations. During a given period, multiple factions may coexist, be divided, or, alternatively, a single faction may dominate. This research argues that over the past three decades of Vietnam's politics, the conservatives, reformists, and opportunists have constituted the three most prominent factions, whose interactions have profoundly influenced VCP decision-making. Simply, the conservatives prioritize regime security and the preservation of ideological orthodoxy to some extent, the reformists emphasize market-oriented economy and social modernization, and the opportunists prioritize the pursuit of personal interests above all else. It is also worth noting that, although some recent scholarship suggests that the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam has gradually moved from the periphery to the center of Vietnamese politics, functioning as a shadow parliament that shapes and influences policy-making (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022), this research does not adopt that view. Instead, it agrees with Vuving (2006) and argues that the core decision-making body within the VCP resides in a tiny circle: the Politburo, and in some cases, the General Secretary himself. The Politburo brings together leaders from different factions and serves as a crucial locus for observing the dynamics of factional politics in this research. With all these critical definitions and distinctions, the analysis of the intervening variable becomes more operationally precise.

This research employs a qualitative research methodology, as it is best suited for examining the complex and nuanced dynamics of each structural and domestic factor and their impact on foreign policy. The process-tracing method is applied to analyze sequences of events, key turning points, and decision-making episodes related to policy formulation. Most of the data is drawn from secondary sources, including scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and archival records. Where possible, the research also incorporates primary materials, such as defense white papers and government statistical reports.

Explaining Vietnam's Changing China Policy: Phases and Factors

In this section, this research revisits Vietnam's policy toward China from 1990 to 2024. By applying the NCR analytical framework developed in the previous section, it examines *how* and *why* Vietnam's China policy has evolved into its current form.

Phase 1 (1990-2000): Bandwagoning Towards China

The period from 1990 to 2001 was critical for VCP's choice to the future. Within the VCP Politburo, it has historically been divided into two main factions seeking regime survival: the conservatives and the reformists, each representing contrasting worldviews. Led by the Party General Secretary (Do Muoi) and President (Le Duc Anh) and their successors, the conservatives inherit the tenets of communism and define national security primarily in terms of ideology, geostrategy, and military strength. They uphold the superiority of socialism over capitalism and maintain a steadfast belief that socialism will ultimately prevail. For the conservatives, preserving the party's dominant leadership role is paramount (Abuza, 1998). In contrast, the reformists, represented by the Foreign Minister (Nguyen Co Thach), Prime Minister (Vo Van Kiet), and his successors, prioritize economic cooperation and opportunities (Porter, 1990). They place less emphasis on ideological concerns, advocating for proactive engagement with global economic interdependence while largely avoiding the rhetoric of class struggle between socialism and capitalism.

The two factions engaged in fierce debates over nearly all policy areas, leading to slow progress and indecisiveness in reforms throughout the 1990s. Scholars have observed and described this condition as social immobilism and Parkinsonism (Womack, 1997; Thayer, 2000; Koh, 2001) and have attributed it to factional struggles between the party's conservatives and reformists (Abuza, 2001). During the 8th Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the 10th National Assembly, the so-called 'big three', the General Secretary, the President, and the Prime Minister retained their respective positions due to lack of ideal successors. However, by 1997 they had finally identified their *protégés*, the new *troika* of General Secretary Le Kha Phieu, President Tran Duc Luong, and the Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, the old 'big three' remained active in the core politics in advisory roles, symbolizing the elder statesmen politics and fierce factional struggles of the 1990s (Duc, 2012).

However, the conservatives maintained the upper hand (Abuza, 1998; Womack, 1997), which fundamentally influenced Vietnam's decision to bandwagoning China. A series of cases demonstrated Vietnam's bandwagon with China. On the eve of Sino–Vietnamese normalization in 1990, which also coincided with a critical period of leadership transition within the VCP, the Party ousted Nguyen Co Thach—well known for his hardline stance toward China—from both the Politburo and the Central Committee, the military also argued that Vietnam should be more conciliatory and adopt a less anti-China stance (Thayer, 1994a) after the prolonged Sino-Vietnam was in the 1980s. At the same time, General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh adopted a more conciliatory posture by acknowledging China's contributions to the Vietnamese revolution. His successor, General Secretary Do Muoi, actively advanced the process of normalization with Beijing (Thayer, 1994b). Following normalization, according to Thayer, Vietnam even sought to expand bilateral ties to include security guarantees or the establishment of a military alliance, but these overtures are rejected by China.

On the contentious South China Sea issue, the conservatives consistently counseled conciliation and pursued a 'quiet diplomacy' aimed at accommodating China, chose a lowkey response, sending only a diplomatic note for peaceful negotiation to avoid confrontation, refraining from publicly criticizing China's actions over the Spratly and Paracel Islands, and establishing high-level working groups with China to allay suspicions and continue peaceful negotiations on maritime territories. In late 1992, the VCP Central Committee confidentially redefined Vietnam's foreign policy through a resolution that stratified the nation's foreign relations into a hierarchy of priorities, with China at the top of the first category (Thayer, 1994a). Another illustrative case is General Secretary Le Kha Phieu's tenure, during which the conservatives stalled the completion of a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) with the U.S. in 1999. Moreover, in negotiations over Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Hanoi displayed a clear reluctance to move ahead of China in joining the organization. On the land border issue, Le Kha Phieu reportedly made deliberate concessions to Beijing by acceding to China's demarcation plan, which accelerated negotiations and led to the signing of the Vietnam–China Land Border Treaty in 1999 and the Gulf of Tonkin Delimitation Agreement in 2000 during his term. The draft political report repeatedly emphasized that Vietnam's foreign policy orientation would remain centered on socialist solidarity and relations with neighboring states (Thayer, 2001; Abuza, 2002).

During the 1990's, Vietnam was bandwagoning rather than hedging against China. Using the conceptual framework outlined in the previous section, this paper finds that politically, the VCP's emphasis on safeguarding communist orthodoxy and one-party rule pushed Hanoi to lean ideologically toward Beijing. Economically, the VCP's concerns about economic liberalization led Vietnam to follow and accommodate China closely. This is also evident in Hanoi's decision to build a 'socialist market economy' model that closely mirrored China's trajectory. On territorial disputes, Vietnam adopted a posture of complete deference, relying on 'quiet diplomacy' to accommodate China rather than openly contest its actions. From the hedging conception, one might argue that Vietnam's simultaneous accession to ASEAN and its resumption of relations with the U.S. reflected elements of political or military hedging. However, in sharp contrast to the dominance-denial or limited bandwagoning found in the conceptual framework, Vietnam explicitly recognized China's dominance within the communist world and placed bilateral relations with Beijing at the top of its foreign policy priorities, a joint statement for Comprehensive Cooperation was issued in 2000. By comparison, U.S.–Vietnam defense relations developed only very slowly, and as Lohman et al. (2012) note, both sides continued to harbor deep suspicions about each other's long-term strategic intentions. This mutual mistrust precluded any serious attempt by Vietnam to use the U.S. as a counterbalance or to hedge against China militarily —an option Hanoi deliberately avoided.

Vietnam's bandwagoning with China can be explained through the NCR analytical framework. At the systemic level, structural uncertainty played a critical role; the transition of the world from the bipolar Cold War order profoundly shaped the VCP's foreign policy choices. Specifically, the global landscape shifted with the end of the Cold War, the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the sustained blockade and embargo imposed by Western countries. At the same time, China's overwhelming political influence as one of the few remaining communist states, combined with the success of its economic reforms, and its good neighbor foreign policy, structurally shaped Vietnam’s strategic orientation, while the positive historical legacies, particular those China’s assist towards Vietnam during its war of independence also exerted certain influence, providing important political rhetoric narratives to justify the normalization of relations and maintain frequent topic on high-level exchanges. At the domestic level, Vietnam’s leadership is deeply concerned about and threatened in terms of the survival of their communist regime. The conservatives within Vietnam’s factional struggles held the relative dominance. Their steadfast commitment to ideological orthodoxy, the preservation of socialist rule, and their skepticism toward liberalism, democracy, and civil society drove Hanoi’s eyes on China. By the late 1990s, the VCP’s core leadership had gradually evolved into a system of elder statesman politics, which to some extent perpetuated the pro-China foreign policy and continued to influence Vietnam’s diplomatic posture into the early 21st century.

Phase 2 (2001-2009): A Shift to Light Hedging

At the beginning of 2001, Vietnam’s political landscape underwent significant changes. The era of the party strongman had long ended, and the position of General Secretary no longer held the centralized power it once had (Thayer, 2003). Within the core of the VCP, factional struggle reached a relative balance. The Central Committee overturned the recommendation to reappoint Le Kha Phieu as General Secretary and ultimately elected Nong Duc Manh as the new General Secretary. Having ascended from Chairman of the National Assembly to General Secretary, Nong Duc Manh successfully strengthened the role of the National Assembly in Vietnam’s political life. At the top of the political hierarchy, power gradually evolved into a ‘four-pillar’ structure: General Secretary Nong Duc Manh, President Tran Duc Luong, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, and Chairman of the National Assembly Nguyen Phu Trong. Prime Minister Phan Văn Khai, as a *protégé* and successor of Vo Van Kiet, exhibited clear reformist factional traits, whereas Nguyen Phu Trong, who had long served as editor of the party’s ideological journal Communist Review (*Tap Chi Cong San*), displayed strong conservative characteristics. President Tran Duc Luong appeared to serve as a compromise figure between conservatives and reformists, reflecting Vietnam’s geographical and political balance, without strong alignment with any particular faction (Abuza, 1998). General Secretary Nong Duc Manh, this research argues, acted primarily as an intra-party mediator. As Thayer (2003) notes, Nong Duc Manh attracted support from various factions within the party and maintained ideological friction at manageable levels.

A collective leadership accelerated Vietnam's significant global integration and market reforms. Vietnam's foreign policy also has subtly changed, with pragmatism supplanting ideology as the guiding principle. In July 2003, the Resolution 9, which passed on the Eighth Plenum of the Ninth Central Committee, was identified by scholars as a watershed in Vietnam’s foreign policy (Vuving, 2006; Pham, 2011). This resolution downgraded the socialist ideology but adopted the concepts of 'partner' (*Doi Tac*) and 'opponent' (*Doi Tuong*) to determine friends and foes as the prime basis for conducting foreign relations. Specifically, countries that advocate respect for Vietnam’s independence and sovereignty, and that promote relationships based on friendship, equality, and mutual interests are considered as partners. Conversely, states that conspire or act against Vietnam are deemed opponents. This identification also emphasiz that convergence and divergence of interests can coexist within relationships, and that cooperation or struggle should be based on the country's attitudes towards Vietnam, not their ideological affiliations.

Within this context, Vietnam demonstrated accelerated omnidirectional foreign relations with major powers, including China, while actively integrating into the international economic system. Between 2001 and 2009, Sino-Vietnamese relations generally trended upward. The two countries completed land border demarcation and monument construction and elevated their ties to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, with China consistently remaining Vietnam's largest trading partner. Concurrently, Vietnam expanded its relations with other major powers by establishing strategic partnerships with Russia and comprehensive partnerships with South Korea in 2001, Japan in 2002, and India in 2003. Vietnam-U.S. relations also accelerated during this period. From 2003, high-level Vietnamese officials—including the Ministers of Trade, Planning and Investment, Defense, and the Deputy Prime Minister—visited the U.S. In June 2005, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai became the first Vietnamese leader to visit the U.S., followed by a reciprocal visit by President George W. Bush in 2006. That same year, Vietnam joined the WTO, and the second Vietnam-U.S. summit in 2008 further strengthened bilateral ties through multiple agreements. At the multilateral level, Vietnam actively engaged regional and international institutions by hosting the 8th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 2001, participating in ASEAN Ministerial Meetings (AMM) and ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summits, joining the inaugural ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and East Asia Summit (EAS), and hosting the 2006 APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Hanoi. These bilateral and multilateral engagements provided Vietnam with a stable and peaceful external environment while accelerating its integration into global economic structures.

Apparently, Vietnam hedged rather than bandwagoned with China during the 2000s, but only lightly in the political domain. The hedging conceptual framework helps clarify how this happened. Vietnam's active integration into the world and concerted efforts to build multilateral diplomatic relations and join international organizations were initially intended to remedy international isolation during the Cold War, and even in the 1990s, to create favorable conditions for its economic development. After 2003, when Vietnam formally elevated shared interests over ideology, its multidirectional diplomacy can be rationally interpreted as a political hedge to partially reduce its overdependence on China. However, the symbolic meaning arguably outweighed the substantive one, as Vietnam continued to view China as its primary model and partner.

Dosch and Vuving (2028) find that at critical junctures, Vietnamese leaders typically actively sought Chinese advice and guidance, particularly on economic matters and questioned their Chinese counterparts about how to reform a socialist economy without losing party control. Bilateral trade between Vietnam and China increased dramatically in the 2000s (Amer, 2012), and many major Vietnamese projects in mining, thermal power plant construction, and chemicals were contracted to China between 2000 and 2015 (Ngo, 2017). Regarding the territorial disputes, Vietnam continued to pursue quiet diplomacy, typically limiting its responses to oral protests and passing diplomatic notes against Chinese assertive actions. Between 2004 and 2008, Hanoi and Beijing intensified high-level meetings on the South China Sea, achieving some progress in conflict management and a noticeable decrease in tensions (Amer, 2009). During the same period, the two countries completed land border demarcation, erected boundary markers, and elevated their bilateral ties to comprehensive strategic corporative partnership—all reflecting Vietnam's ongoing prioritization of and reliance on China. While Vietnam's foreign policy in this phase might unintended displayed certain rudimental political hedging characteristics, but it continued to fluctuate between light hedging and bandwagoning.

The NCR analytical framework works well in answering two puzzles. First is why Vietnam chose to hedge. At the systemic level, the world has been steadily advancing toward multipolarity and economic globalization. For Vietnam, actively integrating into the international system is essential to improving its economy and, by extension, safeguarding regime stability—a goal that requires the pursuit of multilateral diplomacy. At the same time, Vuving (2006) notes that the Vietnamese leadership is shocked by U.S.-Iraq War and has come to recognize the unbeatable power of the U.S. Then, they are gradually abandoning the traditional notion of the irreconcilability between socialism and capitalism and instead accepting the need to promote deeper engagement with Washington. Moreover, Vietnam's profound asymmetry of power with China, the lingering negative historical sentiments in Sino-Vietnamese relations, and China's 'creeping assertiveness' in the South China Sea have been magnified domestically by the rapid expansion of Vietnam's market economy, mass media, and the nascent development of civil society (Thayer, 2009). These dynamics have fueled waves of anti-China protest within the country. However, this paper argues, that while such domestic narratives could post pressures, but they have not produced substantial impacts on Vietnam's foreign policy choices. At the domestic level, the relative balance of factions means that the reformists are no longer as heavily constrained by the conservatives as in the past, enabling them to advance and implement deeper international integration. Consequently, Vietnam's foreign policy began to exhibit light and rudimentary hedging, primarily characterized by diplomatic diversification and omnidirectional partnerships.

Second is why Vietnam's hedging is rudimentary and fluctuating—or, in other words, why it has been confined primarily to the political realm while exhibiting little economic hedging towards China. This paper seeks to offer an alternative explanation from the perspective of factional politics, an angle that has received scant attention from most scholars. Corruption and abuse of power remain the VCP most serious problem (Dosch, 2009). As Vietnam transitioning to a market-oriented economy, the reforms unleashed new opportunities for rent-seeking and the misuse of power, leading to increasingly severe corruption. Individuals who used money to manipulate politics and then leveraged political power to accumulate money gradually formed a distinct faction within the VCP, which this research terms as opportunists. These actors could emerge from either the conservative or reformist camps, but their only purpose was to gain money. The opportunists were led by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, who leveraged his vast network of allies and access to key resources to emerge as the most powerful figure within the party. By the mid-to-late 2000s, the opportunists' rapid rise positioned them as the largest faction within the party.

The Chinese bauxite mining in Vietnam's Central Highlands (Marston, 2012; Jason, 2015) is the case that exemplifies how the opportunist faction intervened Vietnam's foreign policy. In this bauxite mining case, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung received substantial economic assistance from China (Vuving, 2010). Consequently, despite strong domestic opposition and petitions over environmental risks, economic dependence, and national security concerns *vis-à-vis* China, Nguyen Tan Dung persisted in allowing Chinese companies to exploit bauxite in the Central Highlands. As head of the opportunist faction, his support for these projects was primarily motivated by the pursuit of personal benefits. Vietnam's deepening economic ties with China, coupled with Beijing's good-neighbor and going-out diplomacy, created further opportunities for the VCP's opportunists to extract money through political power. This explains why, at the economic level, Vietnam tended to bandwagoning with China rather than hedging. Moreover, the bauxite mining case demonstrates that systemic historical legacies—including anti-China sentiments—did not determine or even influence Vietnam's foreign policy. Instead, the country's diplomatic decisions were ultimately made by the small circle of Politburo core members.

Phase 3 (2010-2016): Towards Profit-Motivated Heavy Hedging

Vietnam's leadership transition in 2011 had restructured the 'four pillars' with the newly appointed General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, President Truong Tan Sang, Chairman of the National Assembly Nguyen Sinh Hung, and the reappointed Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. By the 2010s, entrenched corruption, nepotism (*Con Ong Chau Cha*) and government inefficiency had pushed the VCP's legitimacy to the brink of crisis (Vuving, 2013). Factional struggles within the party quickly evolved into open confrontation between the conservatives, led by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, and the opportunists, headed by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. As Fforde (2012) observes, the role of the General Secretary increasingly appeared to be subordinate to that of the Prime Minister. Since 2009, Vietnam's approach to the South China Sea disputes with China has gradually shifted from its earlier quiet diplomacy to a more open and active stance. The nearly two-month-long confrontation between China and Vietnam in 2014 over South China Sea brought bilateral relations to their lowest point since normalization.

Vietnam's foreign policy during this period exhibited a clear hedging characteristic, with heavy degree. The hedging conceptual framework explains how Vietnam was heavy hedging China. Particularly, in defense and security, Vietnam proactively sought to counterbalance China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea. Beginning in 2010, Vietnam and the U.S. institutionalized a set of mechanisms, including U.S.–Vietnam Political, Security, and Defense Dialogue (PSDD) and the U.S.-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue (DPD), as well as regular naval exchange activities, all of which have continued to the present. In 2011, the two sides signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation. Then, in 2015, they signed the U.S.-Vietnam Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations, which significantly upgraded defense cooperation (Dung & Vu, 2024). In parallel, Vietnam accelerated arms procurement and deployment, including some designated for maritime defense. At the same time, its land reclamation projects in the South China Sea, as reached their peak in 2015 (Chen, 2021).

Diplomatically, Vietnam moved even further from rigid ideological constraints and steadily broadened and elevated its multilateral relations. Notable developments included Vietnam elevating its relations with Russia to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2012 and with India to the same level in 2016, the establishment of a Comprehensive Partnership with the U.S. in 2013, and the historic visit of General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to Washington in 2015—the first ever by a VCP General Secretary. As ASEAN Chair in 2010, Vietnam lobbied with ASEAN countries to frame the bilateral territorial disputes with China as a regional issue for multilateral discussion, aimed to enmesh China in the web of multilateral institutional framework. Economically, Vietnam sought to hedge against overdependence on China by further diversifying its trade relations, accelerating the conclusion of bilateral trade agreements, and actively pursuing entry into broader free trade frameworks, such as the Korea–Vietnam FTA, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the Europe Union–Vietnam FTA (EVFTA).

However, these moves did not amount to outright balancing against China, as Vietnam continued to maintain close political engagement with Beijing. For instance, following the major confrontation over China's Haiyang 981 oil rig in 2014— a crisis sparked by China's deployment of a massive deep-water drilling platform into disputed waters of the South China Sea-both sides dispatched high-level delegations to manage disputes diplomatically. Moreover, Hanoi remained cautious in its dialogues with Washington, often briefing Beijing afterwards to deny any anti-China intent and avoid provoking China. The 2011 U.S.–Vietnam naval exchanges, for example, were limited to non-traditional security cooperation, explicitly excluding combat training and officially declared unrelated to South China Sea tensions (NBC News, 2011). Similarly, before his historic U.S. visit, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong first traveled to China, and later that year hosted Xi Jinping's visit to Hanoi, signaling a high-level political trust.

Meanwhile, Sino–Vietnamese defense cooperation was not suspended but instead expanded, with joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin and along the land border becoming increasingly institutionalized. Thus, even as Vietnam pursued more intensive hedging measures, it simultaneously sought to avoid creating the impression of a complete tilt toward the U.S. The series of contradictions and mutually counteracting behaviors collectively constitute Vietnam's heavy hedging, a mixed alignment choice of political, economic, and military hedging, as well as the limited political bandwagoning measures and using the web of multilateral institutional framework to have China's assertiveness in check, which have fully met the concept of heavy hedging. Therefore, Vietnam's China policy during this period should be classified as heavy hedging.

More crucially, why was Vietnam hedging against China heavily during 2010–2015? At the systemic level, uncertainty primarily arose from shifts in U.S. strategy. In July 2010, during the ASEAN Regional Forum held in Hanoi, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explicitly declared that freedom of navigation in the South China Sea was a U.S. national interest

(Landler, 2010). The U.S. pivot to Asia created maneuver for South China Sea claimants, particularly Vietnam, which constituted a crucial precondition for its hedging behavior. At the same time, the negative historical legacies of Sino–Vietnamese relations, China's growing military power, and its increasingly assertive behaviors in the South China Sea placed additional systemic pressures on Vietnam's foreign policy. However, systemic opportunities and pressures must be filtered through domestic political dynamics before shaping concrete foreign policy outcomes. In this regard, Vietnam's factional politics profoundly influenced how the country managed and exploited external opportunities and constraints.

As the opportunist camp becomes the most powerful faction within the VCP, corruption pervades society as a dominant phenomenon, and national interests are subordinated to personal gain; this research argues that rationalist explanations alone are insufficient to account for Vietnam's foreign policy behavior. Instead, human nature, particularly the opportunistic pursuit of wealth, influence, and power by political elites, play a decisive role. In other words, Vietnam's foreign policy is often designed to prioritize the interests of the corrupted ruling elite, as evidenced by its military hedging. The involvement of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in economic activities has long been commonplace (Thayer, 2017). By securitizing and amplifying disputes in the South China Sea, the military establishment was able to capture greater resources and benefits. During Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's tenure, his Minister of Defense Phung Quang Thanh emerged as the head of the military rent-seeking network (Vuving, 2023a), repeatedly accused of corruption (Chân dung Quyền Lực, 2014). This corresponds to a decade of rapid military procurement and large-scale land reclamation projects, where state approval of contracts and acquisitions facilitates profit extraction—an all-too-familiar pattern in Vietnam's corruption-prone political economy. This also helps explain the seemingly illogical phenomenon that, after Phung's retirement in 2016, Vietnam's military procurement slowed significantly despite China's continued investment in military capabilities in maritime domains.

From another perspective, rather than viewing China's assertiveness as dramatically intensifying after 2009, it may be more accurate to argue that Vietnam deliberately adopted a tougher stance. By exposing Chinese actions through the media and online platforms and by selectively tolerating anti-China protests, Hanoi sought to portray itself as a vulnerable yet deserving actor, thereby legitimizing its push for rapid military modernization and more joint civil–military projects. For example, the 2014 confrontation over China's Haiyang 981 oil rig in the South China Sea was not the first maritime clash. In fact, as early as the 1990s, Beijing had engaged in actions towards Vietnam described as 'rubbing salt into the wound' (Thayer, 1994a). However, over relatively a long period from the 1990s to the 2000s, Vietnam opted for muted responses. The same logic extended into the economic realm. Under Nguyen Tan Dung's cabinet, economic diversification was not only a developmental imperative but also a vehicle for rent-seeking. Expanding bilateral trade agreements and pursuing multilateral trade frameworks often served as channels for profit extraction by Dung and his *protégés*.

Factional politics further illuminates Vietnam's limited bandwagoning with China in the political sphere. For the conservative faction, maintaining symbolic alignment with Beijing is a way to preserve internal power balance and counteract the growing influence of opportunist elites. Taken together, Vietnam's heavy hedging behaviors after 2009 was the product of systemic and domestic interactions. While external dynamics created pressures and opportunities, it was domestic politics—particularly factional struggles and the interests of opportunist elites—that determined the form, intensity, and objectives of hedging. Ultimately, hedging was not only a rational response to external uncertainties but also a practice aimed at consolidating wealth, power, and influence by the party's large opportunists' network.

Phase 4 (2017-2024): Towards Security-Driven Heavy Hedging

During the intense factional struggles of the 12th Party Congress, Nguyen Phu Trong broke the age norm to secure an over-age reappointment as General Secretary. At the same time Nguyen Tan Dung gradually retired from the political stage. Trong was regarded as an ideologist and a conservative whose ambition was to rescue the VCP from decay, yet he was also extremely risk-averse (Vuving, 2019). In his second term, Trong assumed complete control of the anti-corruption drive known as the Blazing Furnace (*Dot Lo*). Trong's anti-corruption drive involved disciplinary measures and prosecutions against corrupt officials, tighter control over civil society and the information space, and a large-scale crackdown on powerful businesspeople in private sector (Vuving, 2023b). By the end of his second term, Trong had become the most senior, powerful, and dominant leader within the Party, surpassing the Prime Minister, the Chairman of the National Assembly, and even the President—a post he concurrently held for over two years from 2018 to 2021. At the 13th Party Congress, he once again broke the age limit to secure a third term as General Secretary. His strong General Secretary period lasted through that term until his death in July 2024.

During Trong's second term, he appointed and retained numerous technocrats in key positions. For example, Pham Binh Minh's elevation to the Politburo indicated that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had returned to the power center and had a representative in the Politburo, Vu Duc Dam's continuation as Deputy Prime Minister meant that this reformist, who began his career as secretary to former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet and possessed professional expertise in economics and theory, had the opportunity to continue exerting influence, and Vuong Dinh Hue, an economic expert and Trong's *protégé*, was appointed Deputy Prime Minister. These personnel choices weakened networks of opportunistic rent-seeking and helped strike a balance between reformist and conservative forces. Nevertheless, in Nguyen Phu Trong's third term, the anti-corruption campaign showed signs of overreach. Many officials, fearing political fallout, became hesitant to implement policies. High-profile technocrats such as Pham Binh Minh and Vu Duc Dam were dismissed at the end of 2023, and a wave of reshuffling within the Politburo followed quickly in early 2024. The public security bloc led by To Lam gained more seats in the party's power central. Following Trong's death and To Lam's succession as General Secretary, most Politburo members come from security and military backgrounds, with a notable lack of experience in economic governance and multilateral diplomacy. The VCP leadership appeared to be shifting rapidly toward a more centralized and personalized form of strongman politics under To Lam.

Throughout this period, Vietnam's China policy exhibited heavy hedging. Economically, driven by deep concerns over a potential debt trap, Vietnam offered only rhetorical support for China's BRI without substantive participation (Vuving, 2019). Vietnam excluded Huawei from its domestic 5G network construction and instead concluded agreements with European and South Korean partners. In 2017, Vietnam joined the multilateral trade agreement – the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a revised version of the original TPP. At the same time, Hanoi stepped up lobbying the European Union for the EVFTA, which was eventually signed in 2019. These moves illustrate Vietnam's efforts to diversify trade partners and reduce its structural economic dependence on China. Diplomatically, Vietnam significantly upgraded its relations with major powers. In 2022, it elevated relations with South Korea to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, followed by similar upgrades with the U.S. and Japan in 2023, and with Australia and France in 2024 (see Table 1). Notably, Vietnam was the only Southeast Asian country to participate in the 'Quad Plus' meeting at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, an informal U.S.-led grouping that discussed restructuring global supply chains away from China (U.S. Department of State, 2020). These diplomatic moves underscore Hanoi's omnidirectional foreign relations with major powers. In the defense and security domain, Vietnam's cooperation with the U.S. deepened considerably. American aircraft carriers made port calls to Vietnam in 2018, 2020, and 2023, accompanied by exchange activities, and Vietnam joined U.S.-led multilateral maritime exercises. Since the U.S. fully lifted its lethal arms embargo in 2016, permanent defense exports to Vietnam exceeded US$29.8 million from 2016 to 2021, while cumulative military sales surpassed US$118 million. Vietnam also received two Hamilton-class cutters from the U.S. (Dung & Vu, 2024), twelve high-speed guard boats, and a missile corvette from India. These developments indicate that Vietnam is proactively building itsmilitary and defense capacity.

At the same time, Sino-Vietnamese relations evolved in a relatively stable and upward trajectory. Regarding the South China Sea disputes, Vietnam adopted a restrained, head-down approach. In 2017, Hanoi cancelled a drilling project with a Spanish company under Chinese pressure. Then, in 2019, when a Chinese oil-survey ship entered disputed waters, Vietnam responded with diplomatic protests but deliberately avoided escalation (Zeberlein, 2024). Similar restrained responses characterized most subsequent maritime confrontations, which, despite becoming more frequent, were managed within a relatively stable *modus vivendi* (Vuving, 2019). Regarding political rhetoric, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong demonstrated a discernible pro-China orientation, as reflected in his public remarks describing China–Vietnam relations as being at their 'best period in history' (Xinhua News, 2018). Regarding diplomatic posture, Trong partially distanced Vietnam from Western democracies. Notably, between 2020 and 2022, Vietnam made almost no upgrades in its bilateral relations with Western countries. Even after upgrading relations with Washington, Hanoi hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping in the same year and agreed to join China's Community of Shared Future. This diplomatic gesture symbolically reaffirmed the special status of Sino-Vietnamese relations and rhetorically elevated it above Vietnam's other bilateral partnerships.

Table 1. List of Partnership

Country	Level of Partnership
China	Long-term stable, future-oriented, comprehensive cooperation, good-neighborliness (1999) Good neighbors, good friends, good comrades and good partners (2003) Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership (2008) Building a Vietnam-China Community with a Shared Future (2023)
Russia	Strategic Partnership (2001) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2012)
India	Strategic Partnership (2007) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2016)
Korea	Strategic Partnership (2009) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2022)
U.S.	Comprehensive Partnership (2013) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2023)
Japan	Strategic Partnership (2006) Extensive Strategic Partnership (2014) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2023)
Australia	Comprehensive Partnership (2009) Strategic Partnership (2018) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2024)
New Zealand	Comprehensive Partnership (2009) Strategic Partnership (2020) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2025)
France	Strategic Partnership (2013) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2024)
U.K.	Strategic Partnership (2010)
Germany	Strategic Partnership (2011)
Canada	Comprehensive Partnership (2017)
Malaysia	Comprehensive Partnership (2004) Strategic Partnership (2015) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2024)
Singapore	Strategic Partnership (2013) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2025)
Indonesia	Strategic Partnership (2013) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2025)

(Source: Compiled by the author, as of April 2025)

Meanwhile, in its 2019 Defense White Paper, Vietnam formally expanded its previous "Three Nos" policy—namely, no joining of military alliances, no aligning with one country against another, and no foreign bases on Vietnamese territory—into a "Four Nos" policy (Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2009). The additional principle explicitly stipulates no use or threat of force in international relations (Vietnam Ministry of National Defense, 2019). This articulation signaled, at least implicitly, that Vietnam would not align itself with the Western camp against China. Overall, Vietnam's diversification in trade, expansion of strategic partnerships, and defense cooperation with external powers, alongside its restrained yet symbolically deferential approach toward China, are consistent with the logic of the heavy hedging conceptual framework.

To explain Vietnam’s adoption of a heavy hedging stance during this period, it is essential to examine both the structural dynamics and the internal politics. From a systemic perspective, the uncertainties play a large role. Since the mid-2010s, China has exhibited greater confidence and assertiveness both regionally and globally. At the same time, the U.S. aimed to counter China's rising global influence by implementing a comprehensive, multidimensional strategy to counter and decouple China across almost every domain. Southeast Asian countries are living in the shadow of uncertainty amid an era of comprehensive great-power rivalry, where risks are always accompanied by opportunities. For Vietnam, however, the risks outweigh the opportunities mainly due to systemic historical legacies and the significant asymmetry in power capabilities between Vietnam and China. Negative sentiments rooted in Vietnam’s long history of Chinese domination, combined with the vast disparity in economic and military capabilities, have intensified Vietnam’s threat perception of China in the era of great-power rivalry. Then, systemic factors consistently exert pressure rather than providing incentives on Vietnam.

At the domestic level, this research argues that the anti-corruption drive, as a manifestation of intraparty factional struggles, generated a series of ‘butterfly effects’ that profoundly shaped the specific orientation and implementation of Vietnam’s foreign policy. Under Nguyen Phu Trong’s leadership, the anti-corruption drives effectively curtailed the web of opportunists and partially restored the balance between reformist and conservative factions. However, the campaign also elevated Trong to the position of the most powerful leader within the VCP since Le Duan in the Cold War era. Trong’s profound concern for communist regime security, including internal decay and external pressure, combined with his cautious and conservative risk assessment, largely shaped Vietnam’s China policy during this period. Specifically, Vietnam proactively adopted heavy hedging in the diplomatic and economic domains to mitigate systemic risks associated with uncertainties and overreliance on China, while simultaneously sustaining political trust with Beijing and consistent muted and restrained to displayed deference to China over its South China Sea disputes. All these behaviors constituted Trong’s flexible yet resilient bamboo diplomacy (*Ngoai Giao Cay Tre*).

Conclusion

This paper addresses *how* and *why* Vietnam’s China policy evolved from 1990 to 2024. By dividing this period into four phases, the analysis demonstrates that Vietnam’s China policy transitioned from bandwagoning in the 1990s to light hedging in the early 2000s and gradually developed into a pattern of heavy hedging after 2010, which has persisted to the present. While Vietnam’s foreign policy evolution was shaped by both systemic pressures and domestic political dynamics, this research finds that intra-party factional politics within the VCP directly structured the logic of its China policy. During the 1990s, the conservative faction was relatively strong, and concerns over regime security and ideological stability in the wake of the Cold War’s bipolar collapse led Vietnam to adopt a bandwagoning approach toward China. By contrast, in the 2000s, as reformists and conservatives reached a relative equilibrium, the VCP’s urgent need to integrate into the global economy, coupled with recognition of its inability to counter U.S.-led capitalist power, prompted a prioritization of economic integration and multilateral diplomacy. This dynamic led to a *de facto* political hedging posture, as diplomatic diversification unintentionally created a form of political hedging *vis-à-vis* China. Subsequently, from the 2010s onward, Vietnam's China policy exhibited characteristics of heavy hedging. Systemic pressures—including China's rapid rise and the intensification of great-power rivalry, expanding from the economic domain into broader strategic confrontation—set the external context. However, a comparative analysis of factional politics between 2010–2016 and 2017–2024 reveals distinct domestic drivers. During 2010–2016, heavy hedging was largely driven by the largest opportunistic faction within the VCP, which exploited systemic opportunities to advance personal interests. In contrast, from 2017 to 2024, heavy hedging was primarily shaped by the conservative faction's perception of systemic pressures, aimed at insulating Vietnam from great-power competition and regional turbulence.

The research further distinguishes between light and heavy hedging, depending on the different alignment choices used. In Vietnam's case, light hedging is manifested primarily through diplomatic diversification to avoid overreliance on China. Heavy hedging, however, involves a combination of mixed alignment choices: economic diversification to reduce dependency on China, military measures such as strengthening defense capabilities and engaging in multilateral security cooperation for indirect balancing, diplomatic efforts such as enmeshing China within a variable institutional framework, and limited bandwagoning measures—including deference and a selective low-profile stance on South China Sea disputes, high-level political exchanges to build political trust, and ideological resonance. Overall, these findings contribute to hedging theory in two main ways. First, they validate that hedging behaviors can be driven not only by risk-contingent considerations but also by opportunistic incentives. Second, the demonstration and distinguishing between light and heavy hedging offers an operationalizable framework for analyzing hedging practices in greater detail.

Beyond these theoretical contributions, the results underscore the central thesis of this study: small states should not be assumed from the outset to function as unitary actors, a complexity frequently overlooked in oversimplified and one-dimensional analyses. In the case of Vietnam, this study points out that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not the highest foreign policy-making body; rather, the VCP's Politburo serves as the direct body responsible for all political decisions in Vietnam. Vietnam's China policy is primarily determined by a small group of Politburo members. Contrary to the common perception of the Communist Party's highly unified one-party rule, this study presents substantial evidence that the Vietnam's Politburo does not function as a unitary actor, but rather as a coalition of different factional representatives. The evolution of converging and diverging interests, as well as the trade-offs among these political factions, directly shape the trajectory of Vietnam's China policy. More broadly, this research contributes to neoclassical realism by introducing factional politics as an intervening variable, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the policymaking process.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to Professor Cheng-Chwee Kuik for his invaluable guidance and inspiration throughout the entire process of writing this paper. The author also extends his heartfelt thanks to the anonymous reviewers and editors for their thoughtful and constructive comments. Their feedback has played a crucial role in enhancing the quality and depth of this article. The author acknowledges that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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