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**Rethinking the Actual Security Strategy of Vietnam, a
Middle Power's Status in the International Order**

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Abstract

Middle powers do matter within the international order. They are therefore capable of implementing their own agenda and security policy. However, to what extent does their policy have an impact on great powers' agenda? Especially when middle powers are navigating triangular relations with two other great powers, how can they display a security strategy that allows them to be a proactive actor in the world order?

The conventional wisdom is that middle powers hedge vis-à-vis great powers, which means they are neither balancing nor bandwagoning, but this strategy encompasses different definitions according to each scholar. Moreover, hedging possesses limits when it comes to different forms of power display and how to ascertain it and its evolution in the long run. Thereby I argue that middle powers can practice soft-balancing with accommodations of their own capabilities and to a certain extent, display a setting-agenda policy vis-à-vis great power. And they can achieve this policy by taking advantage of major outbreaks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, middle powers can make full use of their economic growth, national identity, role in institutions and coalitions, and practice new and innovative forms of diplomacy which redefine their status. To demonstrate my argument, I am examining the case of Vietnam, a Southeast Asian country that since the COVID-19 pandemic, has been capable of progressing towards a globalist approach to its security strategy and role in the international order.

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1. Introduction

The concept of middle powers has various definitions and aspects. Middle power theory represents a growing area of interest in international relations. One interesting definition that I will draw on about what is a middle power, is: “A middle power is a state actor which has limited influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system, but is capable of deploying a variety of sources of power to change the position of great powers and defend its own position on matters related to national or regional security that directly affect it.” (Shin, 2015).

After reading this definition, one can ask: To what extent are middle powers able to impact the great powers' agenda? What kind of security policy can they display?

Regarding those questions, three different approaches exist. First, the realist approach states that middle states' policy response seems limited to either bandwagon or balancing strategies (Morgenthau et al., 1985; Walt, 1987). Thus, middle powers have no agency vis-à-vis great powers. Then, the liberal approach shows that middle powers may have an influence if they display their power through alliances, security communities, or international organizations. However, their impact on power politics is restricted to their weak material capabilities (military capabilities). Or they can only display a certain role as mediators between great powers (Oraganski and Kugler, 1980; Spero, 2009). Thus, this proves their lack of autonomy with either great powers or international institutions and other actors. In terms of policy, this is often translated by 'hedging' which is a strategy that is a mix of balancing and bandwagoning elements. Finally, this security policy gives a relative agency to middle powers vis-à-vis great powers. Finally, the third approach is the constructivist one. Constructivist scholars perceive middle powers as states that possess full agency which allows them to change the regional and international order. They emphasize the role of middle powers through a normative-focused policy that is established on the use of

multilateral co-operations (Gilley and O’Neil, 2014; Emmers and Teo, 2018). However, this main approach is limited by the tautological aspect of the role and definition of middle powers per se.

In this discussion, I argue that middle powers are important to study to comprehend the interactions between them and greater powers at the systemic level. Moreover, middle powers can act and establish their own foreign policy vis-à-vis greater powers. I believe that middle states have more room for maneuvers when tensions increase in the case that the global order is destabilized by a new global crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Kuik, 2021; Dinh Tinh & Thu Ngan, 2021). In my approach, middle powers possess a semi-agency vis-à-vis great powers agenda. And that purpose can be achieved through a soft-balancing strategy with accommodations of the concept to apply it to middle powers ecology. Being able to define in a precise way middle powers’ security strategies is an interesting matter that can change scholars’ perceptions of the outcomes of security dilemmas. It also means that the redefinition of middle powers’ involvement in security matters with greater states offers scholars another argument to predict the aftermaths and potential solutions to a conflict. I am going to investigate this possibility by taking the case study of Vietnam.

The conventional wisdom is to describe Vietnam’s security policy as hedging vis-à-vis China. Yet the notion of hedging in the definition of Vietnam security strategy encompasses definitional and conceptual weaknesses such as difficulty to ascertain, the ambiguity of the use of the term, fast evolution of the concept, in the long run, assurance policy... (Chung 2004; Goh 2005; Roy 2005; Lim and Cooper 2015). After considering the change at the domestic and systemic level since 2014 in Vietnam and throughout the world, I propose to fill this gap by defining more precisely the actual security strategy of Vietnam, an emerging middle power (Do, 2022). In addition, Vietnam is an interesting case regarding the

management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Against the odds, Vietnam as a middle power comes out of the pandemic with remarkable economic growth and successful management, even better than great powers. That is why I propose a revision of the concept of hedging to define foreign policy by trying to ascertain to what extent Vietnam is a middle power capable of agency in the security dilemma in times of systemic disruption. Furthermore, I consider a scenario that fits the Vietnam case which offers more agency to his middle power thanks to a setting-agenda policy, which allows middle powers to have a global proactive role. This setting-agenda policy is a path for further research about how middle powers can innovatively integrate themselves into the international order.

To support my argument, I am going to collect and interpret evidence found in the economic, military, diplomatic, identity, and historical realms for my case study, Vietnam. I am using secondary sources, as well as the Vietnam 2019 white paper and dataset of global peace measurement and military expenditure (Global Peace Index and SIPRI Milex data) to conclude my case study. In the first part, I am presenting a literature review of my puzzle, showing the different approaches that exist and their limits. Then, in the theory part, I am exposing how my argument, for the use of soft-balancing for middle powers, can fill the gap in the literature. Also, I am demonstrating the impact of COVID-19 on the display of power for middle powers. And, how it can be a shifting point that helps middle powers implement a soft-balancing strategy that gives them more impact vis-à-vis great powers. In the last section, I am presenting my case study, Vietnam. I am showing findings and interpretation regarding my case study through three sections; first, by presenting the evidence on threat perception, diplomacy, and the South China Sea conflict, then in the economic realm. Finally, the last section of the empirics is showing the institutional process, security cooperation, and identity of ASEAN and especially, Vietnam and its proactive role within this organization.

2. Literature Review

Throughout the literature, different main approaches can be identified: the most common explanation of middle powers' agency vis-à-vis great powers is that middle powers had a relative or limited impact on the agenda of great powers, which led them to 'hedge' vis-à-vis great powers. In brief, 'hedging' is a security strategy with many conceptualizations that draw on the balance-of-power theory, but I will further develop the definitional aspects in the following paragraphs.

Then, a more constructivist approach gives more agency to middle powers' foreign policy because, by definition, a middle power has its own behavior completely distinct from the great powers and its own significant interests that can be performed globally (Efstathopoulos, 2018). Finally, a realist approach to the impact of middle powers vis-à-vis the great powers doesn't believe that middle powers can set an agenda on their own because they are fully dependent on the great powers' agenda (Walt, 1987).

2.1 Three approaches and their limits

Conventional international relations theory shows that "secondary states" or "middle powers" are rather "policy takers" than "policymakers" when it comes to dealing with other great powers. For some scholars, middle states' policy response seems limited to either bandwagon or balancing strategies. International relations theory thus refers to the great powers and the rest (Morgenthau et al., 1985; Walt, 1987). This approach doesn't explain the regional initiatives of middle powers that in themselves create a particular position in a certain area such as the Asia Pacific. The complexity of this specific area and the uncertainty that surrounds it makes it difficult to predict if middle powers can effectively bandwagon or balance when at least two great powers face each other (the United States and China) but Japan and India are

also present there with their interests as well as a coalition of middle states powers (Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar).

Moreover, the other limitation of the classic balance-of-power theory relies on the fact that scholars will only take into account material capabilities in the security domain (military capabilities and sometimes economic capabilities too). This offers a narrow conception of security and thus, limits the possibilities of interpretation of what is in play in a complex area, while other scholars will take into account diplomatic factors, leaders' discourse, state identity, and behavior (Haacke, 2003; 2019).

For others, the middle powers may have an influence on the global order through alliances, security communities, or international organizations, but this remains limited to their weak material capabilities (military capabilities) or their capacity to bridge” between great powers (Oraganski and Kugler, 1980; Spero, 2009). In that case, “bridging” means that the middle powers can play the role of intermediary. As a result, it can be seen as a way to undermine and marginalize the potential influence of middle powers because it proves their lack of autonomy with either great powers or international institutions and other actors. This argument is often supported by the explanation that the middle powers are practicing a ‘hedging’ strategy. I will introduce the concept that hedging is an alternative to balancing and bandwagoning. Indeed, scholars argue that it is a combination of engagement and containment, thus avoiding having to choose the side of one state over another as part of a security dilemma (Jackson, 2014).

As a result, the state under pressure from a possible threat hopes to keep its independence in an uncertain context where major powers are fighting to determine which one will be hegemonic in the region. To reduce risk in uncertain strategic conditions, states hedge, therefore, it is not a balancing strategy because this strategy does not respond to a direct threat.

Other reasons push states to hedge, including the theory of power transition, the concept of mistrust in the context of multilateralism, and the complexity of the network (Jackson, 2014). Indeed, Asia Pacific is a complex area in terms of the number of actors and resources. This complexity can be defined as having three attributes: sensitivity, fluidity, and “heterarchy” (Jackson, 2014). The interaction of these three attributes leads states to hedge. According to this logic, as soon as the United States or China emerges victorious and dominates the Asia Pacific, the other Southeast Asian states will support this great power and therefore bandwagon with it instead of hedge. On the other hand, in the context where the puzzle evolves towards a multipolar realism, the states that hedge will be pushed to multiply the alliances and therefore turn to a balancing strategy. While waiting to know the future hegemonic power of the region, uncertainty persists as well as the hedging strategy that will last as long as the situation is not clarified (Korolev, 2019).

In addition, the interdependence of economies and security in the area does not benefit a climate of sensitivity and fluidity of relationship patterns, which makes the choice between bandwagoning and balancing even more difficult, hence hedging is the solution (Jackson, 2014). So, it is a mix of different policies but made simultaneously to keep the great powers involved “equidistant” and maximize the benefits while avoiding aggravating the risks. Some scholars like Goh (2005) present this as a mixture of balancing and engagement, or like Medeiros (2005), a mixture between cooperation and competition, or finally, Tunsjø (2017) as a mix between cooperation and confrontation, which gives this impression of ambiguity.

The other major conception of the notion of hedging gives a distinct definition of balancing and bandwagoning. In this definition, hedging is considered as a form of “insurance policy”, a “protective option” or a “prudent behavior” (Ciorciari, 2019). Hedging is thus a strategy that contains various measures that aim to reduce harm if a potential threat becomes

real. For this, this strategy requires a limitation of alignment, because by limiting its external balancing, the state avoids exposing itself to the loss of its independence and autonomy in the context of tight security pacts for example (Ciorciari, 2010). It is then a very distinct conception of balancing or bandwagoning because one could say that hedging refers to “security arrangements” that allow security cooperation with a potentially threatening state but in an extremely limited way. And this cooperation tends toward the resolution of security contingencies without directly pointing the finger at a particular adversary.

Finally, one goal of hedging is to avoid financial crises while maximizing fruitful trade, investments, and constructive interdependence. By strengthening its domestic economy, the hedging state strengthens its “self-help” (Ciorciari, 2019), which is essential to manage to keep the threat of an overly interdependent economy that would possibly collapse during a financial crisis, under control. This is one of the most crucial points for smaller countries that are often dependent on the economies of the great powers. This is why some smaller countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, have sought to create external security partnerships with the United States to try to avoid too strong interdependence with China and the Chinese market.

Therefore, the ultimate limit of this approach to the security policy is the vague definition of ‘hedging’ itself, which doesn’t describe the same pattern of policy for each scholar. Finally, Koga (2018) and McDougall (2012) point out that the concept of hedging evolves rapidly in the long run and can change towards more elements of balancing or bandwagoning which transform the hedging strategy into different patterns that need to be specified.

Another approach is to perceive middle powers as states that possess agency that allows them to change the regional and international order thanks to the creation of their own identity and their capacity to be ‘norm-makers’. Thus, the middle state's foreign policy relies on a

normative-focused policy which is established on the use of multilateral co-operations (Gilley and O'Neil, 2014). In that, Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) described three major preferences that characterize middle powers' behaviors: projecting good international citizenship as the normative basis of foreign policy, then seeking multilateral agreements to resolve global problems, and finally, assuming crisis management initiatives to alleviate instability in global affairs. To realize these objectives, middle powers pursue three types of strategies: niche diplomacy that helps concentrate diplomatic resources in specific regimes, intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership to overcome limitations in material resources, and coalition building with like-minded states (Cooper et al., 1993). Thus, in a behavioral approach, middle powers have their own distinct diplomatic roles because they can exhibit both material and behavioral attributes.

But, the criteria to define the behavior of middle powers must be more defined because the limit of this approach is that it can be perceived as a tautology (Stephen 2013, 39).

The tautological puzzle can be stated by the following: "middle powers are those that practice middle power internationalism" while at the same time, "middle power internationalism describes the behavior of middle powers" (Chapnick 1999, 76). "Middle powers are understood to adopt middle power behavior because this reflects their national role conception and the expectations associated with foreign policy activism" (Efstathopoulos 2018, 6). Therefore, it is difficult to determine where the power and status of middle powers come from, and according to that, define precisely the policy of secondary states.

Table 1: Summary table of the three most common approaches to the impact of the middle powers on the agenda of the great powers and my argument in this puzzle.

<i>Impact of middle powers over great powers</i>	<i>Security policy</i>	<i>Implications</i>	<i>Limits</i>
No impact (Entire dependency) (Realism)	Bandwagon or Balancing (Classic balance-of- power theory)	-Middle powers don't have a status that matters in the international order -Alignment with great powers -Material attributes	-Not a satisfactory explanation in the context of a complex area -Only material attributes count -Narrow vision of power
Relative impact (Liberalism)	Hedging	-Take into account the uncertainty and complexity of the context -Responding to a potential threat or a risk -Avoiding economic crisis -Avoiding picking a side with one of two great powers -"Self-help", engagement, assurance policy, ambiguity	-Vague definition of the concept -Difficult to ascertain -Fast evolution of the concept in the long run
Impact possible, From a semi-agency to a possible agency of middle powers (my argument)	Soft-Balancing with accommodations for middle powers	-Take advantage of major international outbreaks (Covid-19 consequences) -Policy mixed of realist and constructivist approaches -Economic investments and growth	-Can only be achieved thanks to a specific international context and change in the international order toward more regional influence

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Clear threat perception -Cooperation inside regional institutions with other middle power countries 	
	<p><u><i>A possible scenario that gives more agency:</i></u> Agenda-setting policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National identity of resilience -Surprising effect of middle powers resistance -Proactive role 	
<p>Impact possible, Full agency of middle powers (Constructivism)</p>	<p>Normative-focused policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Niche diplomacy -Multilateralism -Global citizenship -Coalition-building -Potential of non-material forms of leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Tautology of middle powers behavior and status -Dependency on institutions, or other actors -Difficult to measure the effectiveness of those strategies

3. Theory

3.1 Alternative approach, arguing for a semi-agency of middle powers through soft-balancing.

3.1.1 Soft-balancing as a security policy for middle powers in times of change in the international order.

In this discussion, I argue that middle powers are important to study to comprehend the interactions between them and greater powers at the systemic level. Moreover, middle powers are able to act and establish their own foreign policy vis-à-vis greater powers. Middle states have more room for maneuvers when tensions increase between great powers (Kuik, 2021). Being able to define in a precise way middle powers' security strategies is an interesting matter that can change scholars' perceptions of the outcomes of security dilemmas. It also means that the redefinition of secondary states' involvement in security matters with greater states offers scholars another argument to predict the aftermaths and potential solutions to a conflict. And thus, the conventional wisdom is to say that Vietnam as a "middle power" or "secondary state" is hedging vis-à-vis China. However, one can observe that there is an evolution of this security strategy towards a larger conceptualization of "soft-balancing". This means that Vietnam and middle powers with the same characteristics through soft-balancing can impact in a semi-agency the great powers' agenda.

But what is "soft-balancing"? According to McDougall (2012), soft-balancing focuses more on diplomatic and political responses. He explained that for middle powers, insofar as balancing is occurring in relation to 'rising China', it is the soft version that is most relevant. There is a range of possibilities within soft balancing, each country practicing this strategy is doing it with its own characteristics and this can evolve. But a "military component is involved in the sense that states engaging in soft balancing need to convey the message that they can

deploy armed forces in support of their strategic objectives; however, the emphasis is on signaling through diplomatic means that the powers involved wish to constrain rather than confront China” (McDougall 2012, 4). An important component is domestic politics and the perceptions of the political elites upon great power. Moreover, the historical experience of relating to China can be very relevant in this context.

Yet, based on what is soft-balancing, this strategy is initially dedicated to describing the rivalry between two great powers in a competition as Pape (2005) explained it. For him, it is a concern of major powers facing a sole great power over the direct or indirect threat. He is taking the example of major powers like Japan or China, considered “second-ranked powers”, that use soft-balancing against the United States. But the soft-balancing strategy can also be explained in the context of middle states’ power facing great powers but with accommodation of the concept (Paul, 2018; McDougall, 2012).

By definition, “balancing is about equalizing the odds in a contest between the strong and the weak. States balance when they take action intended to make it hard for strong states to use their military advantage against others. The goal can be to deter a strong state from attacking or to reduce its prospects of victory in war” (Pape 2005, 36). States can balance through either "internal" balancing (i.e., rear-moment or accelerated economic growth to support eventual rearmament) or "external" balancing (i.e., organization of counterbalancing alliances). In most multipolar systems, both forms of balancing are possible. When it is about soft-balancing, it is a strategy to avoid a direct confrontation with one’s own forces. It heavily relies on nonmilitary tools but can have a direct or indirect effect on the military prospects. “Soft-balancing can establish a basis of cooperation for more forceful, hard-balancing measures in the future” (Pape 2005, 17). This can be exploited in the case of a middle power vis-à-vis a great power.

According to Pape (2005), soft-balancing comes with four mechanisms: territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, economic strengthening, and signaling of resolve to participate in a balancing coalition. The soft balancing tools are thus the use of international institutions, economic statecraft, and ad hoc diplomatic arrangements.

The goal of soft-balancing is in a way transposable to the middle power's goal vis-à-vis great power in the security dilemma. Pape (2005) mentioned the case of soft-balancing against the United States: "Soft balancing may not stop the United States from conquering a rogue state or from pursuing a vigorous nuclear buildup, but it can have significant long-term consequences for U-S security" (Pape 2005, 13). In the context of the Asia Pacific puzzle, soft-balancing may not stop China from "conquering a rogue state or from pursuing a vigorous nuclear buildup" per se, but it can have significant long-term consequences for China's security. The consequences can be the reinforcement of a bad reputation and the build-up of a counter coalition of states that becomes influential in the zone, which establishes constraints for the great power in the long run.

3.1.2 Why is 'soft-balancing' a relevant recent policy option for middle powers?

Because the soft-balancing policy is based on the use of international institutions, economic statecraft, and ad hoc diplomatic arrangements, this policy can be achieved by middle powers only at a time when they can grow and change their strategies vis-à-vis great powers. They need room to maneuver. For that, middle powers can take a significant advantage when the great powers in the regional and international order are competing with each other in the regional and international order.

The fact that China rose in the early 2010s changed the regional and international order. It became the symbol of the beginning of "the rise of 'the rest'" (West, 2020). And it intensifies the competition between a rising China and the dominant power, the United States. Within the same dynamic, the COVID-19 pandemic became a 'game-changing factor' like the scholars

Dinh Tinh and Thu Ngan pointed out in their recent article (2021). It facilitates the emergence of new dynamics for middle powers which succeeded in the management of the pandemic. This major outbreak was an interesting shifting point to observe and acknowledge the gap existing between the success of Asian pandemic management and the West's failure. On one hand, COVID-19 exposed the weaknesses of the West in terms of management and effectiveness, revealing health system issues and the lack of interstate cooperation. On the other hand, it shows Asian strength and effectiveness. Which offers a new light of analysis, by giving a new focus on other Asian countries.

Otherwise, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the conflict and competition between the United States and China. It caused an escalation of tensions and changed, even more, the perceptions of weaker countries towards these two great powers. For example, many countries were disillusioned by the potential cover-up of the virus by the Chinese government, the disinformation campaign, the aggressive diplomacy of China ('Wolf and Warrior Diplomacy'), and the mask diplomacy. During the pandemic, these countries realized their strong dependency on China. That is why a large number of countries chose to 'decouple' their economies from China whenever it was possible. Regarding the United States, the same depreciation persisted. The management of the pandemic had been really poor and the US even reached peaks of the biggest worldwide death rate. Moreover, the decisions taken by President Donald Trump's government during the pandemic hurt the reputation of the US governance and leadership, especially because of the harsh treatment of key allies and the disrespect of Western-led institutions (such as the WHO) (West, 2020).

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the relationship between the United States and China. Middle powers were then confronted with their position of intermediate, stuck between the two great powers. They couldn't depend on either the US or China for the challenges imposed by the pandemic. With this pressing competition and the challenges of

COVID-19, middle power diplomacy has re-invited itself. Brattberg (2021) mentions shifting middle power diplomacy towards diplomacy that “shor[es] up the rules-based order and multilateralism independently of the United States and China” (Brattberg 2021, 221).

Middle powers have the capacity by definition to integrate and adapt themselves to their regional context. They have a better knowledge of regional tensions or realities. So, they can detect opportunities, seize them and develop innovative regional approaches quicker than the great powers. Because the great powers will immediately look for a global approach that takes more time and resources to tackle the challenges. Interestingly, thanks to the middle power status in the international order, the middle power can at the same time be heard by great powers and trusted by weaker powers. This position implies a certain degree of agency towards great powers. Middle powers can thus act without the pressure of the backing of another great power. They can adopt different strategies thanks to this window of autonomy (de Swielande, 2018). The more interconnected a middle power is with the rest of the world, the more a middle power is a node in the network that is functionally indispensable. So, power derives from the position itself in the network rather than from control of resources and capacities. But it is the dynamic role of middle powers in the network that permits them to act. This is what de Swielande called the “middle-up-down approach” (de Swielande 2018, 21). Which is a relevant approach that helps to understand how an emerging middle power is capable of agency vis-à-vis great powers.

3.2 Complementing scenario, for an agency of middle powers through a proactive role of agenda setting.

The agenda-setting argument is precisely an argument that locates itself in the middle of two arguments previously developed; the semi-agency one through soft-balancing policy that I argue for, and the full agency one supported by constructivists through normative-focused policy. This policy is a way to redefine the role of middle powers as proactive actors capable

of impacting not only their regional direct area but also, at a more global level. Different ways of operations can be displayed by states to reach an effective proactive role. Some may argue that it is primarily through a normative focus (Emmers and Teo, 2018). However, other factors come into play especially, the build-up of a community, the process of regional and global integration, the historical impact of foreign relations, imperialism, and the promotion of a collective identity (Acharya, 1997; 1998; 2004; 2006).

If one considers that the world order is shaped by crosscutting globalism, in other words, a multiplex world, then middle powers do matter to a higher extent. A multiplex world is when “The maintenance of world order depends on regional orders.” (Acharya 2017, 279). Here Acharya (2017) is explaining that middle powers can have a greater impact on the systemic level through their regional action.

Yet the question remains: how can middle power act more proactively and impact the international order? Higgott (1997) mentions that with globalization and the increasing difficulty to manage the world market economy at the state level, the traditional notions of state identity had been challenged. With the need to tackle new challenges such as those imposed by a globalized market economy or the prospects of hardening inter-regional conflict, states of all ranges have to find other policy approaches. Scholars like Higgott emphasize the importance of collective problem-solving and how it can be achieved through institutions.

The notion of agency in international relations has been redefined and highlighted over the years. For middle powers, a growing set of literature on the subject shows that middle-power foreign services should not be “hamstrung by the intellectual baggage of hegemony” (Higgott 1997, 41). For Higgott, the limitations of middle powers vis-à-vis hegemonic powers can be overcome. Middle powers can then explore innovative ways of practicing various kinds of diplomacy that great powers cannot. And by that, middle powers can influence contemporary

agendas. By exploring how middle powers comprehend and make use of the institutional contexts, one can assume that institutions matter and middle powers too. It is an essential component of how middle powers can address a more global agenda. In that, they can elaborate within institutions that offer them the possibility to reach a wider collective or global sense of responsibility on the international agenda (Higgott, 1997).

As Henrikson (1997) states in his chapter titled 'Middle Powers as Managers', middle powers can have an agenda-setting role. Even if traditionally this role had been taken by great powers, Henrikson argues for the agency of middle powers and their effective power over the international system. His argument is going against Kenneth N. Waltz (1967) who in his essay 'The Superpowers as Managers' develops the proactive role of agenda-setting for great powers and excludes middle powers. However, for Henrikson, every country is affected by the growing process of interdependence which "promotes further differentiation and division of labor" (Henrikson 1997, 50) for small or large countries. Middle-sized powers have been required by the interactions of an even more complex world system to develop managerial capabilities. Henrikson sums it up with the sentence: "They [middle powers] can neither simply lead nor simply follow." (Henrikson 1997, 50).

Then, according to Henrikson (1997), the implicit acknowledgment of middle powers' relative importance can be proven by their integration within international organizations and the UN system. For instance, the acknowledgment of some middle powers in the Charter of contributions by member states for election by the General Assembly to the non-permanent seats on the Security Council is essential to become an agenda-setter. One can also mention the implications of middle powers through the Charter duty to provide military forces to the United Nations through Article 43 or the funding of UN peacekeeping missions.

In this way, middle powers can have a proactive agenda-setting role determined by the fact that they can have three different functions: ‘to conciliate, to interconnect, and to integrate’ (Henrikson 1997, 55). Thus, they display different diplomacy to ‘mediate’ but in an active way, which means that they can for example practice ‘mediatory diplomacy’ through the ‘intermediation’ role or ‘planetary management’ role.

The ‘planetary management’ is particularly interesting because it is aimed at the integration of the international system. A ‘mediator-as-planetary manager’ has to engineer collaborative solutions to solve global issues. Such a country with an agenda-setting role is capable of addressing conflict management, challenges of demilitarization, trade liberalization, and environment protection. It requires an organizational approach to world order which middle powers can display within different levels of organization: local, regional, and international (Henrikson, 1997).

4. Case study, Vietnam

4.1 Why is the ‘hedging concept’ not fitting into the actual security strategy of Vietnam?

Some researchers such as Lim and Cooper (2015) have seen Vietnam’s security strategy as a way of rebalancing power, so Vietnam is seeking to get closer to the United States in terms of security partnerships. Because of the territorial conflict between Vietnam and China in the South China Sea and the escalation of tensions that this led to in the years 2014-2015, Vietnam has increasingly sought military rapprochement with the United States, which shares with Vietnam the same vision for the South China Sea conflict. This goes beyond the conception of hedging because Vietnam is seeking to get closer to the United States to respond to the direct threat posed by China in the conflict between them (Lim and Cooper, 2015).

Most Southeast Asian countries don't want to perceive China as an enemy to continue to see it as a trade partner. However, the change in the Southeast Asian countries' strategy depends on the involvement of the United States in the area. In the case of Vietnam, the balancing is very subtle. There is a clear rapprochement with the United States in terms of military cooperation, however, China is not considered a direct enemy unless China's actions in the South China Sea intensify and cross the line. Vietnam finds itself in a complex triangular relationship in which it must navigate. Vietnam's security strategy has evolved over the years, before the mid-2010s, the majority of scholars agreed that this strategy was related to hedging. But after the 2010s, there is no longer any consensus, in part because Vietnam has evolved a lot in the last ten years, developing its domestic and foreign policies to its own advantage. Indeed, Vietnam is a one-party ruled country by the Vietnamese Communist Party that exerts strong control over the country's institutions, public opinion, and foreign policies that concern China. But its relationship with other communist countries has evolved a lot, if before Vietnam systematically aligned itself with China, today this is no longer the case. Vietnam has carried out a dazzling economic development called the Doi Moi ("economic renovation") which has allowed Vietnam to taste more autonomy and find other strategic partners (Murphy, 2017).

The case of Southeast Asian countries approaching the notion of hedging is the most used in the literature (Chung, 2004; Murphy, 2017; Haercke, 2019; Ciorciari, 2019 ...). I chose to evaluate the case of Vietnam in particular, because the evolution of its security strategy has been interesting to evaluate in recent years, and therefore, it is the perfect example to determine empirically whether we can still consider that Vietnam hedges in its triangular relationship between the United States and China. One of the first researchers to show that hedging can be applied to a triangular relationship is Roy (2005). According to him, medium-sized states confronted by rising great power such as Southeast Asian countries and China's relations can practice different strategies: engagement, hedging, balancing, or bandwagoning. He argues that

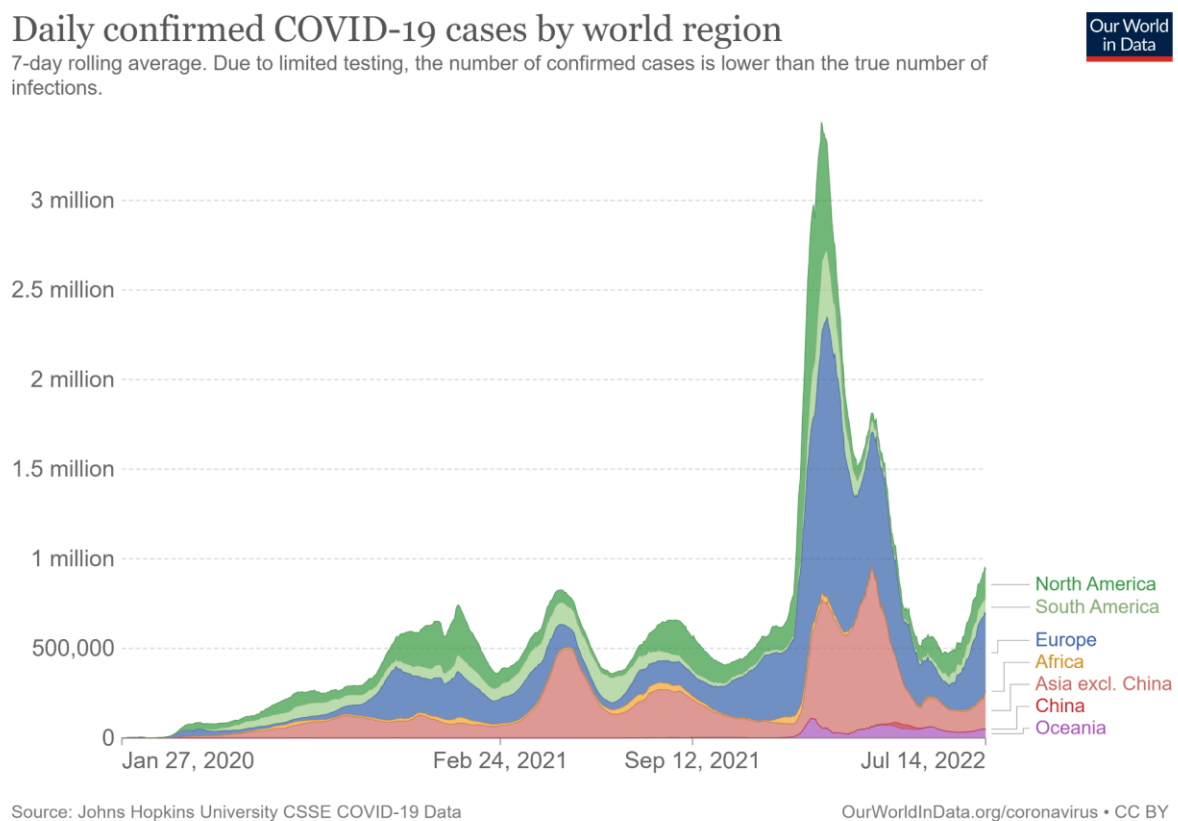
for most Southeast Asian countries, the best strategies are engagement and hedging, but a part of the hedging strategy can be defined as “low-intensity balancing” with the United States and China.

Due to the specificity of a middle power’s position in the international order as Roy (2005) mentions, middle powers are endowed with regional impact and thus, are at least capable of having an impact on some elements of the systemic order (de Swielande, 2018). Because of Vietnam’s recent development, some Vietnamese scholars like Le Dinh Tinh (2021) describe Vietnam as an “emerging” middle power, that is little by little claiming its international role. The fact that a country recognizes itself as a middle power and that others perceive it too, is an essential element. It is called the “self-conception” (de Swielande 2018, 23). But in total, five elements make the difference to define a middle power role and its identity as such: self-conception, the medium range capabilities, regional impact, systemic impact, self-conception, and status. However, de Swielande (2018) emphasizes the need for strong regional impact and self-conception as two decisive components.

After the successful management of COVID-19, Vietnam embodies its role as a middle power, thanks to its strong self-conception and regional impact. For Le Dinh Tinh (2021), “as an emerging middle power, Vietnam sees opportunity in crisis while others might see threat” (Dinh Tinh 2021, 329), hence soft-balancing seems a more appropriate policy. In that, Vietnam had been able to achieve the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic remarkably. Vietnam has thus the possibility to position itself as a middle power that can display a soft-balancing policy. Taking a look at some data regarding the outlooks of the COVID-19 pandemic allows us to show the success of the management of the pandemic and thus, the high potential of obtaining agency.

First of all, Asia in general, did better in the management of the pandemic, in terms of daily confirmed COVID-19 cases by world region (7-day rolling average) from January 2020 to July 2022. The following graph shows that Asia, excluding the case of China, was able to keep the daily confirmed cases under 500,000 until more recently in 2022. On the contrary, Africa, Europe, South, and North America have reached this step early on in 2021.

Graph 1: Graph presenting daily confirmed COVID-19 cases by world region from January 2020 to July 2022 provided by OurWorldInData¹.

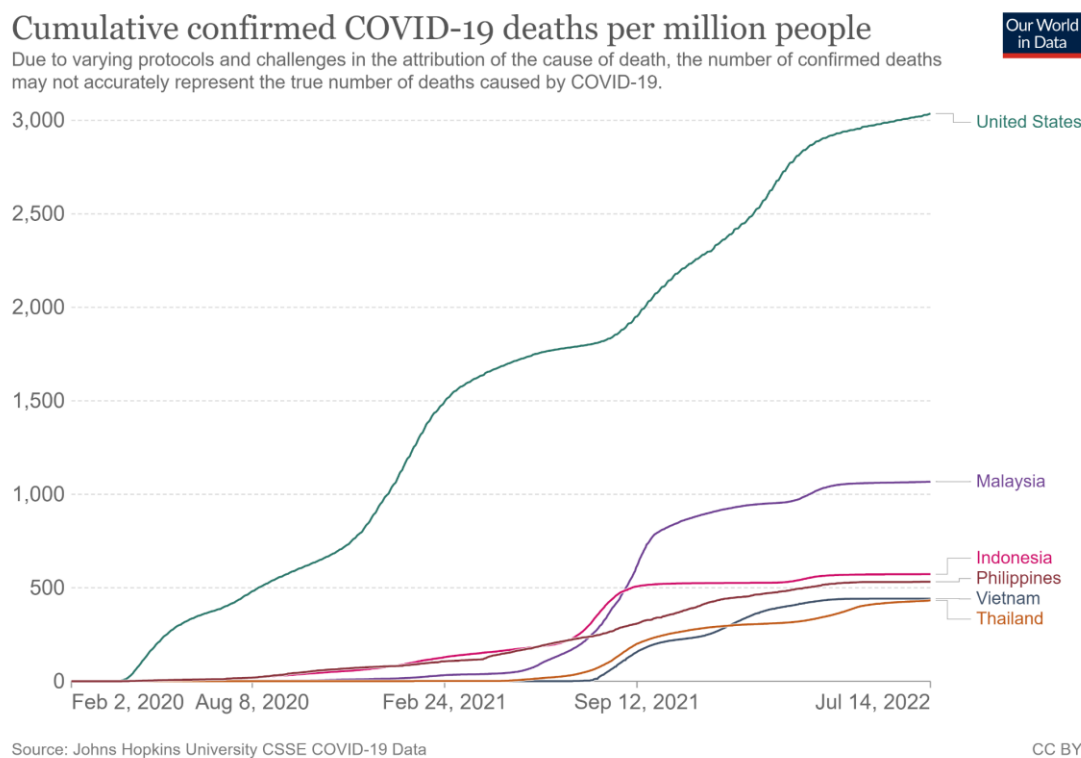


Then, if one looks at the cumulative confirmed death cases caused by COVID-19 per million people from February 2020 to July 2022, one can observe that the death rate of Vietnam

¹ Hannah Ritchie, Edouard Mathieu, Lucas Rodés-Guirao, Cameron Appel, Charlie Giattino, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, Joe Hasell, Bobbie Macdonald, Diana Beltekian and Max Roser (2020) - "Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)". Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: 'https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus' [Online Resource]

is extremely low compared to its neighbors, even though the other Southeast Asian countries themselves managed the pandemic well. As shown by the second graph, the gap of cases confirmed between the United States and Vietnam has been increasing over the years, and now reaches the highest gap of 2,500 million people dead of COVID-19 in the United States more than in Vietnam.

Graph 2: Graph representing the cumulative confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people from February 2020 to July 2022 provided by OurWorldInData².

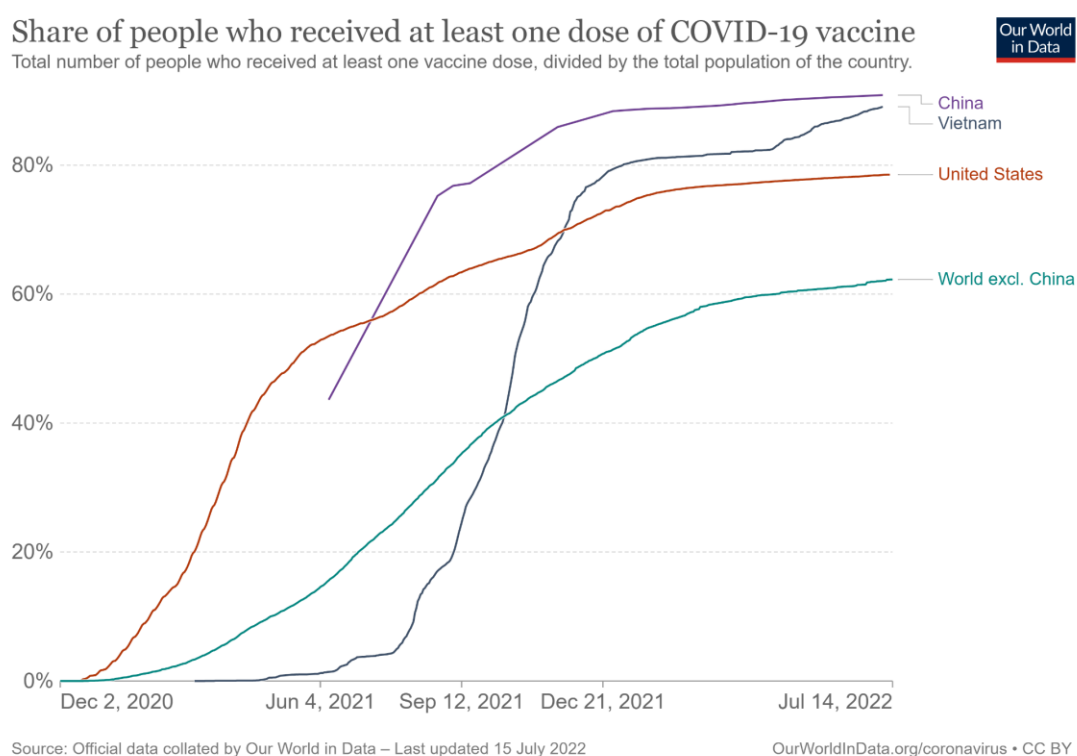


Finally, the most interesting data is looking at the share of people who received at least one dose of vaccine from December 2020 to July 2022. In Vietnam, more than 80% of the population is now vaccinated with at least a first dose, which is close to the share of people in China, the great power that detected the pandemic first and which fought competition with the

² Ibid

United States to be the first to obtain a vaccine. On the other hand, the United States is under 80%. Thus, Vietnam managed effectively the vaccination of its people, in addition to its low confirmed death cases early on the beginning of the pandemic just as graph 3 presents the results.

Graph 3: Graph presenting the share of people who received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine from December 2020 to July 2022 provided by OurWorldInData³.



Finally, in the case of Vietnam, Mc Dougall (2012) mentions that the soft-balancing strategy is the best option in response to rising China. According to him, many factors come into play in the practice of soft-balancing for Vietnam; first, the proximity with China, then its implications in the South China Sea conflict (East Sea conflict), its leading position within ASEAN, and finally, Vietnam’s wishes to improve its relations with the United States and

³ Ibid

India, in other words, creating new partnerships. I will explore more deeply those diplomatic interplays in this part of the thesis.

4. Section I: Threat perception, diplomacy, and the South China Sea conflict ('East Sea' conflict).

To comprehend the case of Vietnam and how the security policy of Vietnam can be interpreted as soft-balancing, I am showing in this section a set of proofs. Starting with the security area, I am focusing on the evolution of the threat perception of Vietnam vis-à-vis China. This is essential to determine the change in the security policy put in place by Vietnam. Security policy not only depends on the domestic environment, the political regime, and ideological principles in which decision-makers operate, but also on the perception of the security environment by the decision-makers themselves (de Swielande, 2018). There is a psychological aspect that comes with the threat perception of elites. "Personal interests, beliefs, personality, ambitions, energy, and skills of [decision-makers] affect the extent to which, and the issues on which, their governments play activist roles in foreign policy" (Ravenhill, 1998, 322).

First of all, to point out this aspect of threat perception in the case of Vietnam, I build on the Defense White Paper published in 2019 and articles that refer to Vietnamese elites' perception of China. Indeed, Vietnam and China's relationship had evolved. Even if one may consider that both communist parties will constitute precious allies, the conflicts that they shared and the new role of Vietnam in the region, pushed the Vietnamese government to advocate a new strategy. This new strategy is called the 'four-nos and one-depend' defense strategy in the 2019 National Defense White Paper.

Initially, the Vietnamese foreign policy is known as the 'four-nos' policy, which means no military alliances, no siding with one country against another, no foreign military bases, and

no using force or threatening to use force in international relations. However, another dimension had been added with the ‘one-depend’ strategy. According to the 2019 white paper, this term signifies that: “Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defense and military relations with other countries depending on circumstances and specific conditions. This revised formula displays the flexible mindset needed in the context of the rising great power rivalry and uncertainty” (Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2019).

In that, Vietnam advocates strengthening and deepening relations with partners, especially those of strategic importance. And thus, Vietnam confirmed its “longstanding balancing act” and reinforced the flexibility and resilience of its foreign policy (Nguyen, 2019). For example, in March 2020, representatives from South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand were included in the weekly Quad meeting (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue⁴) to discuss cooperation for the resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, it is a way for Vietnam to construct strategic partnerships with great powers, other than China in the region and consolidate its position in the Indo-Pacific (Thuong and Oanh, 2021).

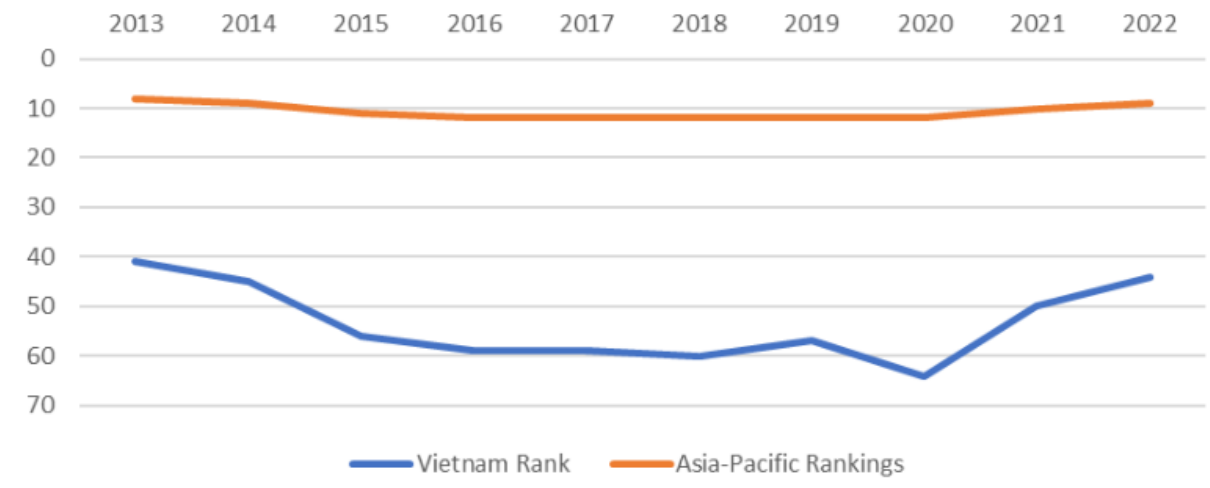
The perception of Vietnam vis-à-vis China is then modified, because Vietnam allowed itself the possibility to maneuver militarily by either expanding its relationships with Western militaries or its own military apparatus. Indeed, the 2021 Global Peace Index⁵ (GPI) reported that Vietnam has recorded “the largest improvement in the region and the fourth largest improvement in peacefulness on the 2021 GPI, improving by 5.3 percent”. The reasons given in the report are that the improvement was driven by changes in the militarization and safety and security domains. Furthermore, Vietnam was one of the few countries in the world not to

⁴ The Quad is initially composed of Australia, Japan, India and the United States.

⁵ URL: [GPI-2021-web.pdf \(economicsandpeace.org\)](https://www.economicsandpeace.org/gpi-2021-web.pdf)

fall into a recession after the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the following graph shows a clear improvement in Vietnam’s rank internationally and regionally.

Graph 4: Graph presenting Vietnam’s GPI rank at the international and regional level compiled with the scores found in the GPI reports from 2013 to 2022.

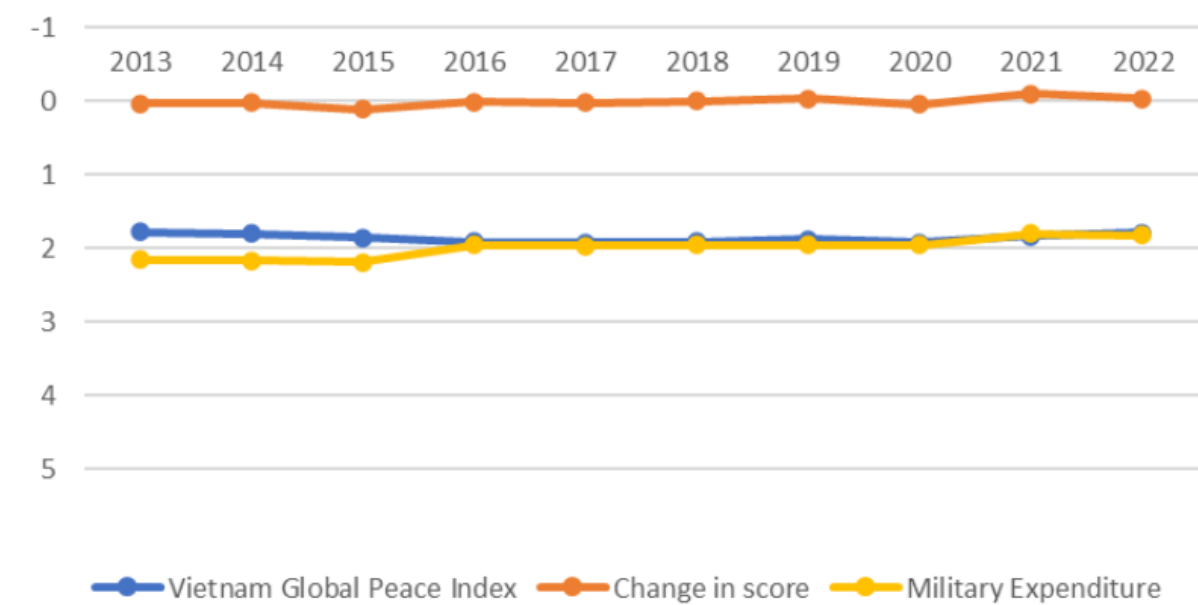


Regarding the militarization domain, it resulted from “an increased commitment to UN Peacekeeping funding while military expenditure as a percentage of GDP also decreased, falling from an estimated two percent of GDP in 2019 to 1.67 percent in 2020”.

Table 2: Table showing the results of Vietnam in terms of GPI, change in score from previous results within the regional rankings, and military expenditure from 2013 to 2022 according to the compilation of the scores provided by GPI reports.

Year	Vietnam Global Peace Index	Change in score	Military Expenditure
2013	1,772	0,035	2,156
2014	1,792	0,02	2,166
2015	1,848	0,107	2,19
2016	1,906	0,007	1,956
2017	1,919	0,018	1,96
2018	1,905	-0,005	1,956
2019	1,877	-0,034	1,956
2020	1,92	0,039	1,956
2021	1,835	-0,102	1,798
2022	1,786	-0,031	1,822

Graph 5: Graph presenting Vietnam GPI Yearly results from 2013 to 2022.



But unlike most countries that experienced a relative fall in military expenditure⁶, this was not the result of a fall in economic activity stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, compared to other countries in ASEAN or China, the decrease percentage in military

⁶ The closest the results are to 0 the better, it means the country is going towards more global positive peace.

expenditure by GDP isn't as significant for Vietnam. In fact, according to SIPRI Milex data⁷ Vietnam stays above many countries in the region when it comes to the percentage of military expenditure per GDP such as China or Indonesia, however, Singapore, Myanmar, and Brunei remain above Vietnam as the following graph shows.

Dataset: SIPRI Milex Dataset showing the military expenditure by GDP of the ASEAN countries and China from 2005 to 2021⁸.

Country	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
China	1,85%	1,85%	1,74%	1,71%	1,89%	1,74%	1,67%	1,69%	1,70%	1,73%	1,75%	1,77%	1,75%	1,74%	1,73%	1,80%	1,74%
Brunei	2,35%	2,30%	2,38%	2,26%	2,94%	2,85%	2,24%	2,16%	2,28%	3,09%	3,28%	3,54%	2,87%	2,64%	3,08%	4,08%	3,26%
Cambodia	1,13%	1,04%	0,91%	0,80%	1,31%	1,49%	1,50%	1,55%	1,60%	1,66%	1,80%	1,91%	2,07%	2,22%	2,23%	2,45%	2,32%
Indonesia	0,75%	0,66%	0,71%	0,58%	0,57%	0,62%	0,65%	0,71%	0,92%	0,78%	0,88%	0,79%	0,87%	0,72%	0,73%	0,86%	0,70%
Laos	0,39%	0,34%	0,31%	0,27%	0,22%	0,20%	0,21%	0,20%	0,19%	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Malaysia	2,17%	2,01%	1,96%	1,82%	1,87%	1,49%	1,55%	1,41%	1,50%	1,43%	1,50%	1,38%	1,10%	0,96%	0,89%	1,01%	1,06%
Myanmar	1,35%	...	...	...	...	...	...	3,90%	4,04%	3,79%	4,30%	4,09%	3,65%	2,31%	2,15%	2,95%	3,33%
Philippines	1,33%	1,32%	1,29%	1,25%	1,20%	1,17%	1,15%	1,11%	1,19%	1,04%	1,09%	1,05%	1,25%	0,82%	0,92%	1,01%	1,04%
Singapore	4,29%	3,95%	3,60%	3,85%	3,88%	3,38%	3,19%	3,11%	3,04%	3,05%	3,05%	3,10%	2,98%	2,84%	2,80%	2,94%	2,98%
Thailand	1,05%	1,10%	1,34%	1,53%	1,70%	1,45%	1,49%	1,38%	1,40%	1,41%	1,43%	1,42%	1,39%	1,36%	1,35%	1,46%	1,32%
Timor Leste	0,44%	0,61%	0,82%	0,54%	1,14%	0,66%	0,36%	0,50%	0,56%	0,73%	1,19%	1,04%	0,92%	0,76%	1,23%	1,16%	1,14%
Viet Nam	1,78%	1,94%	2,30%	2,16%	2,27%	2,31%	1,98%	2,16%	2,18%	2,29%	2,36%	2,44%	2,27%	2,28%	...	...	...

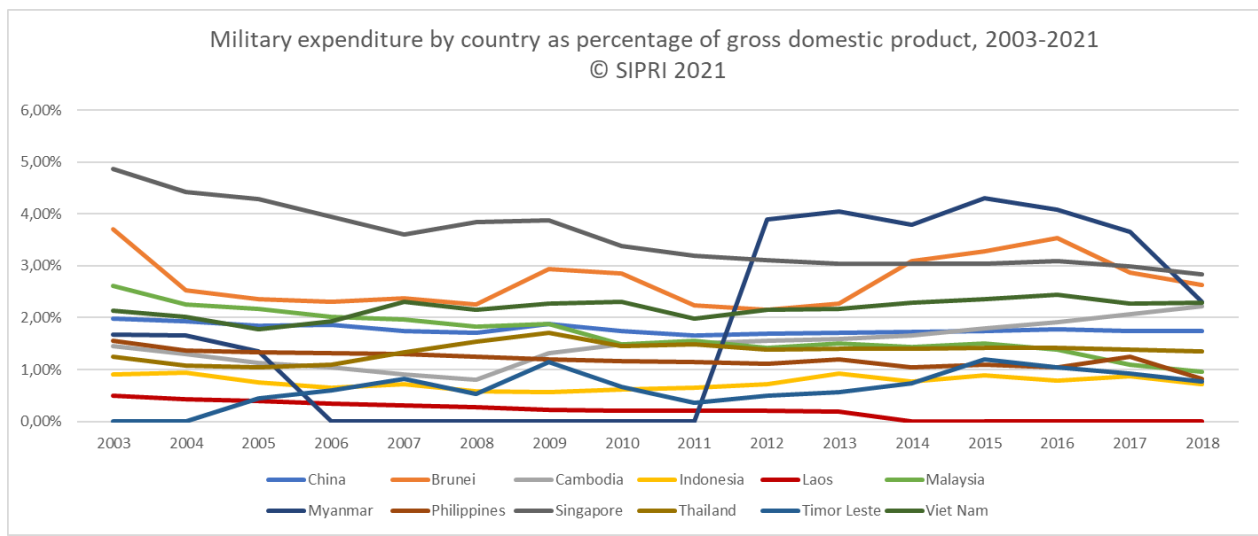
⁷ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database includes data for 173 countries for the period 1949-2020. The database has been newly extended, having in the past only covered the period beginning in 1988. The availability of data over time nonetheless varies considerably by country. A majority of countries that existed at the time have data at least from the 1960s.

For information on the sources and methods for SIPRI data, including methods for calculating calendar year data from financial year data, for calculating constant price US\$ figures, and for estimating missing data for countries as part of the world and regional totals, see <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex/sources-and-methods>.

⁸ Figures in blue are SIPRI estimates. The figures in red indicate highly uncertain data.

"..." means that data is unavailable.

Graph 6: Graph presenting military expenditure by country of gross domestic product from 2003 to 2021 according to the SIPRI database (2021).



The threat perception of Vietnam vis-à-vis China is then an important matter not only because it impacts the military expenditure and strategic partnerships of Vietnam, but it also affects its vision and policy for the Indo-Pacific in which Vietnam possesses a strategic geopolitical role. China’s Belt and Road Initiative as well as its economic influence in the area appears as a threat to Vietnam that needs to respond to it (Thuong and Oanh, 2021).

Strategically, Vietnam is drawing its power from its location by the sea. Three major strategic routes pass through Vietnam: The Trans-Asia road route, the East-West Economic Corridor, and the Trans-Asia railway (Thuong and Oanh, 2021). That is in part why the South China Sea disputes are at the center of the conflict between China and Vietnam, as well as the protection of fishing territories and resources for the Vietnamese. Both China and Vietnam claim their authority upon the islands, Paracel and Spratly, but also free access to maritime space. The conflict started back in 2009 and now involves members of ASEAN such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, and Vietnam, but also Taiwan, China, and the United States. This conflict is a ‘regional flashpoint’. It is also a dispute at the core of the

United States and China's relations, because of the direct involvement of China in the conflict and the indirect involvement of the United States which acts as a Third Party in this issue. Since 2010, the United States has claimed its national interests and its support towards the respect of the international sea laws (Vuving et al., 2014). American involvement had been growing since then, with the 'Pivot to Asia' policy and their interests in the Indo-Pacific Grand Strategy.

Yet, the conflict is not solved nowadays. Recently, in 2020, Chinese provocations still occurred. Even though "the 2016 arbitration award of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague has rejected China's claim on "historical rights" and asserted that none of the contested islands and marine features are capable of generating exclusive economic zones, China continues to assert its claims over the South China Sea territory" (Dufková 2020, 1).

Then, China continues to have skirmishes with the Vietnamese at sea. For instance, a Chinese coast guard vessel sank a Vietnamese fishing boat in the Paracel Islands in April 2020. And the United States gave its support to Vietnam. Since then, Vietnam as the 2020 ASEAN Chair started to deploy a tougher diplomatic line toward China and asserted its own territorial claims and sovereignty over the area. Vietnam is often discussing the South China Sea conflict at the ASEAN summits especially by promoting greater reliance on international law (Dufková, 2020). In doing so, Vietnam has the goal to use ASEAN to solve the conflict and keep its interests. Vietnam thus shows its balancing power. Vietnam searches "to internationalize the dispute to reduce the asymmetry of power with China as well as to enforce a peaceful and rules-based resolution of the conflict" (Emmers and Thu 2021,7). The South China Sea conflict is not sorted out even though China has a strong implication and more military capabilities than Vietnam. However, Vietnam still holds its position and openly challenged Chinese assertive behavior (Emmers and Thu, 2021).

Moreover, Vietnam as the leader of ASEAN during the COVID-19 pandemic managed extremely well the public health emergencies by providing concrete actions but also, by organizing special meetings with its major external partners such as the 14 April summit between ASEAN members and the three East Asian nations of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea, the 23 April meeting between the foreign ministers of ASEAN and the United States and the 17 June meeting between the foreign ministers of ASEAN and Russia (H. Nguyen, 2021).

Thus, Vietnam displayed a new form of diplomacy that permits it to obtain more cooperation with its neighbors through strategic partnerships. This new form of diplomacy had been called during the pandemic, “COVID diplomacy” or “face mask diplomacy”. Vietnam had mainly provided face masks to neighboring countries such as China, Laos, and Cambodia, but also to its comprehensive partners across the world. In fact, Vietnam turned the global pandemic to its advantage, because domestically, Vietnam was managing the outbreak well. This crisis offers Vietnam an opportunity to strengthen its foreign relations and even refused to take the vaccine from China (H. Nguyen, 2021). So, thanks to the COVID-19 crisis, Vietnam had been able to demonstrate its middle power status and gain from it some independence and power over great powers.

4. Section II: From economic renovation (*Doi Moi*) to economic development post-COVID-19.

In 1986, during the Sixth National Party Congress, Vietnam launched a reform period called the policy of *Doi Moi* (Renovation reforms). It has been a way for Vietnam to enter modernity in the sense of the western world in order to integrate itself into the western-led order (Vuving, 2014). The objective of *Doi Moi* was to permit the Vietnamese economy to flourish by transitioning from central planning to a market-oriented economy. The reforms

were “to break out from economic embargo and diplomatic isolation, to boost the national economy, including through attracting foreign direct investment, official development assistance, and trade, to integrate Vietnam into regional and international organizations.” (Emmers and Thu 2021, 4). And then, joining ASEAN in 1995 was part of this reform era to achieve all these goals. During that period of reforms, Vietnam was able to modernize and industrialize and finally, reached dazzling economic growth. In the early years of Doi Moi Vietnam’s “GDP was just 14 billion USD and GDP per capita of only approximately 250 USD” (Loc 2021, 1416), in 2021, the World Bank reported that Vietnam’s GDP was 362.64 billion USD⁹ and GDP per capita was 3,694 USD¹⁰. And those figures had been constantly improving.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, even if the tourism and supply chain economy had been severely diminished as was the case for the rest of the world, Vietnam had been able to keep its economic growth. Vietnam was one of the only countries which recorded net positive GDP growth of 2.91%¹¹ in 2020. According to the IMF, it is one of the highest growth rates in the world (Dinh Tinh and Thu Ngan, 2021). COVID-19 became the “barometer of Vietnam’s resilience and adaptability” (Dinh Tinh and Thu Ngan 2021, 315).

The COVID-19 didn’t stop Vietnam from building partnerships with other countries that allowed Vietnam to attract new foreign direct investments (FDI) and comprehensive partnerships. But Vietnam invigorated bilateral relations through ‘telephone diplomacy’ and had more than thirty-three telephone conversations with Vietnamese leaders’ foreign counterparts (H. Nguyen, 2021). In total, by 2020, Vietnam has signed 15 FTAs (Free Trade Agreements) among them, Vietnam has ratified and implemented the EVFTA (European Union - Vietnam Free Trade Agreement), the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic

⁹ [GDP \(current US\\$\) - Vietnam | Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/ny/gdp/cd?locations=VI)

¹⁰ [GDP per capita \(current US\\$\) - Vietnam | Data \(worldbank.org\)](https://data.worldbank.org/ny/gdp/cd?locations=VI)

¹¹ Dabla-Norris, Era, and Yuanyan Sophia Zhang. "Vietnam: Successfully navigating the pandemic." *IMF*. Retrieved November 3 (2021): 2021.

Partnership), and the UKVFTA (United Kingdom - Vietnam Free Trade Agreement) (Loc, 2021).

Table 3: Summary Table of Vietnam Free Trade Agreements in effect since 2020 and under negotiations: Contents and Impacts for Vietnam.

	<u>Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)</u>				
	<i>In effect</i>			<i>Under negotiations</i>	
	EVFTA (European Union - Vietnam Free Trade Agreement)	UKFTA (United Kingdom - Vietnam Free Trade Agreement)	RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership)	Vietnam - EFTA FTA (Vietnam - European Free Trade Association Free Trade Agreement)	Vietnam - Israel FTA
<i>Dates of effect or start of negotiations</i>	August 01, 2020	May 01, 2021	January 01, 2022	May 2012	December 2015
<i>Parties</i>	Vietnam, EU (27 members)	Vietnam, The UK	ASEAN, China, Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand	Vietnam, EFTA (Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein)	Vietnam, Israel
<i>Main Content</i>	-Eliminating almost 99 percent of customs duties -It contains important provisions for intellectual property (IP) rights, investment liberalization, and sustainable development. This includes a	-Issue regulations on rules of origin and preferential tariffs -All virtually customs duties eliminated	-Build on free trade agreements within ASEAN and will build on economic integration and shape future trade policy.	-May cover a comprehensive range of topics, including trade in goods, rules of origin, trade facilitation, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, technical barriers to trade, trade remedies, trade in services, investment/esta	-May cover trade in goods, rules of origin, customs, technical barriers, trade in services, trade safeguard, investment, government purchase, and other legal and institutional issues ¹³ .

¹³ Vietnam Embassy in Israel, Israel hold the fifth round of negotiations on FTA, on August 27, 2018. url: Vietnam.Embassy.org

<u>Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)</u>					
<i>In effect</i>			<i>Under negotiations</i>		
	commitment to implement the International Labor Organization (ILO) standards and the UN Convention on Climate Change.			ishment, protection of intellectual property, government procurement, competition, trade and sustainable development, and legal and institutional issues. ¹²	
<i>Impact for Vietnam</i>	<p>-Paving the way for increased trade between the EU and Vietnam</p> <p>-Boost Vietnam’s economy as it looks to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>-Expected to help increase Vietnam’s GDP by 4.6 percent and its exports to the EU by 42.7 percent by 2025.</p> <p>-Paired with the EU-Vietnam Investment</p>	<p>-Represents significant opportunities in education, renewables, healthcare, and infrastructure for the UK and Vietnamese businesses and will further strengthen and build on both countries’ trade relationships.</p> <p>-According to the British embassy in Vietnam, Vietnam will save US\$151 million in tariffs.</p> <p>-Support that The UK would also like to join the CPTPP</p>	<p>-Help Vietnam reduce trade barriers and improve market access for its goods.</p> <p>-Reduce tariffs and set trade rules, and help link supply chains, particularly as governments grapple with COVID-19 effects. The FTA is expected to cover all aspects of the business including trade, services, e-commerce, telecommunications, and copyright.</p> <p>-Present significant opportunities for</p>	/	/

¹²Krogh Randi, *EFTA*, Vietnam relation, Ongoing Negotiations, February 17th, 2022. url: [Vietnam | European Free Trade Association \(efta.int\)](https://www.efta.int/vietnam)

<u>Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)</u>					
<i>In effect</i>			<i>Under negotiations</i>		
	Protection Agreement (EVIPA) which aims to protect investors on both sides. ¹⁴	(The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) ¹⁵ .	Vietnamese SMEs to move up the value chain. (SMEs account for 98 percent of all enterprises in Vietnam, contributing to 40 percent of GDP) ¹⁶ .		

Thereby, Vietnam has been regarded as the promised land for inflows of high-quality FDI. During the pandemic, many worldwide firms were seeking new investment opportunities to diversify the supply chain, but also, reduce dependency on the Chinese market. For Vietnam, it is a good opportunity to fill the gap in regional and global supply chains (Loc, 2021).

4. Section III: The power of Vietnamese identity and the ‘ASEAN way’: national resilience and regional cooperation.

Vietnam has demonstrated that its own national identity and regional context represent an asset that can impact the great powers’ agenda. First of all, Vietnamese national identity has been shaped by its unique historical background. After having been through colonialism and the Vietnam war, Vietnam has built a resilient identity. In fact, Vietnam didn’t let the war curb

¹⁴ Dezan Shira & Associates, ‘Vietnam-EU Trade: EVFTA Comes Into Effect’, *Vietnam Briefing*, August 3rd, 2020. url: [Vietnam-EU Trade: EVFTA Comes Into Effect August 1 \(vietnam-briefing.com\)](https://vietnam-briefing.com/vietnam-eu-trade-evfta-comes-into-effect-august-1/)

¹⁵ Pritesh Samuel, ‘Vietnam Issues Preferential Tariffs, Rules of Origin Guidelines for UKVFTA’, *Vietnam Briefing*, June 21st, 2021. url: [Vietnam Issues Preferential Tariffs, Rules of Origin Guidelines for UKVFTA \(vietnam-briefing.com\)](https://vietnam-briefing.com/vietnam-issues-preferential-tariffs-rules-of-origin-guidelines-for-ukvfta/)

¹⁶ Pritesh Samuel, ‘RCEP and Vietnam: New Opportunities for Investors’, *Vietnam Briefing*, November 10th, 2021. url: [RCEP and Vietnam: New Opportunities for Investors \(vietnam-briefing.com\)](https://vietnam-briefing.com/rcep-and-vietnam-new-opportunities-for-investors/)

its efforts to develop relationships with the outside world. Not long after the end of the war in 1975, Vietnam began to meet with American representatives to normalize their relationship (Dinh Tinh, 2021). After that time, Vietnam entered the Doi Moi, reform era, which launched the globalist approach in Vietnam. In that, Vietnam has a strong potential to become an agenda-setter through a proactive role as the driving force for its security policy. A change in Vietnam's foreign policy can be attested not only through security-focused policy but by a proactive strategy with an emphasis on economic development and a more prominent international role.

Vietnam has taken a more globalist approach with, for example, its commitment to ASEAN and the United Nations¹⁷. This means that Vietnam searches for a proactive integration strategy. In the early 1980s, due to its historical experiences and national interests, Vietnam chose to open up the try. The Asia-Pacific region was becoming a more dynamic area and Vietnam had to get out of its isolation. In 1986, Vietnam adopted a globalist mind (Dinh Tinh, 2021). In 1995, Vietnam integrated the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and finally, normalized its relations with China, the United States, and the members of ASEAN. Step by step, Vietnam's survival goal transformed itself toward greater integration into the world order. Then, Vietnam continued its integration thanks to the intra-regional spirit of community and interregional one (East Asia Summit, ASEAN defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus). Vietnam started to make full use of its integration within ASEAN and understood the "larger-than-life role that ASEAN can play in regional diplomacy by engaging more actively in the business of the Association." (Dinh Tinh 2021, 326).

With a collective spirit, ASEAN members can use the function of the Association as a regional agenda-setter and norm-promoter to maximize its goals. As a middle power that displays a different role within ASEAN, Vietnam became a "catalyzer" by bringing major

¹⁷ In June 2019, Vietnam was successfully elected as a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council. (Dinh Tinh 2021, 328)

countries to join and take action within the ARF¹⁸ (ASEAN Regional Forum) and the EAS (East Asia Summit), a “coordinator” by playing the intermediary between the ASEAN and China for the ASEAN Plus summit, but also, an “initiator” by putting together the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Conference with the dialogue partners (ADMM+). Which is a high cooperation mechanism between the defense ministers of the ten ASEAN countries and those of the eight dialogue countries: China, Russia, the United States, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Vietnam is taking a ‘sectoral’ leadership role within those organizations and its regional sphere. It encompasses the use of multilateralism (Dinh Tinh, 2021).

According to Ralf Emmers and Huong Thu Le (2021), Vietnam achieved to become a sectoral leader in international security thanks to its involvement and management of the South China sea dispute, how Vietnam integrated Laos and Cambodia into the regional order, and had a growing significant role as a regional security actor in ASEAN. In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Duyen Le Viet, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Vietnam’s membership in ASEAN, assessed that Hanoi re-orientated its foreign policy “from its intense preoccupation with big powers, particularly China, to a more balanced position in which regional cooperation with other Southeast Asian states plays a significant role” (Duyen Le Viet, 2015). So, a proactive role of Vietnam in the security realm, helped a middle power such as Vietnam to have more agency vis-à-vis China thanks to its cooperation with other ASEAN members.

¹⁸ Vietnam co-chaired different initiatives within the ARF with Australia and the EU, for example, the three ARF workshops on Enhancing Regional Maritime Law Enforcement Cooperation (18-19 January 2018 in Nha Trang, Vietnam, 12-13 March 2019 in Da Nang, Vietnam and 16-17 March 2021, held virtually), the 2021 ISM on Maritime Security on 29 April held virtually, the two workshops on Implementing UNCLOS and other Legal Instruments to Address Emerging Maritime Issues on 26-27 February 2019 in Nha Trang, Vietnam and 1-2 June 2021, held virtually. (sources from the Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, URL: [ASEAN Regional Forum \(ARF\) | Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade \(dfat.gov.au\)](https://dfat.gov.au/ASEAN-Regional-Forum-ARF))

Other policies such as the promotion of free trade agreements and the involvement in peacekeeping fundings and operations prove that Vietnam is taking a turn toward a globalist mindset (Dinh Tinh, 2021). To show the involvement of Vietnam in peacekeeping funding, I compiled the results of the following table (Table 4) with the figure given by each year's report of the Global Peace Index and the Global Peace Index Map from 2013 to 2022¹⁹. The explanations of the scores are as follows: 1/5 0–25% of stated contributions owed; 2/5 26–50% of stated contributions owed; 3/5 51–75% of stated contributions owed; 4/5 75–99% of stated contributions owed; 5/5 100% of stated contributions owed (no contributions made in past three years).

Table 4: Table presenting the score given by Global Peace Index to Vietnam regarding UN peacekeeping fundings from 2013 to 2022.

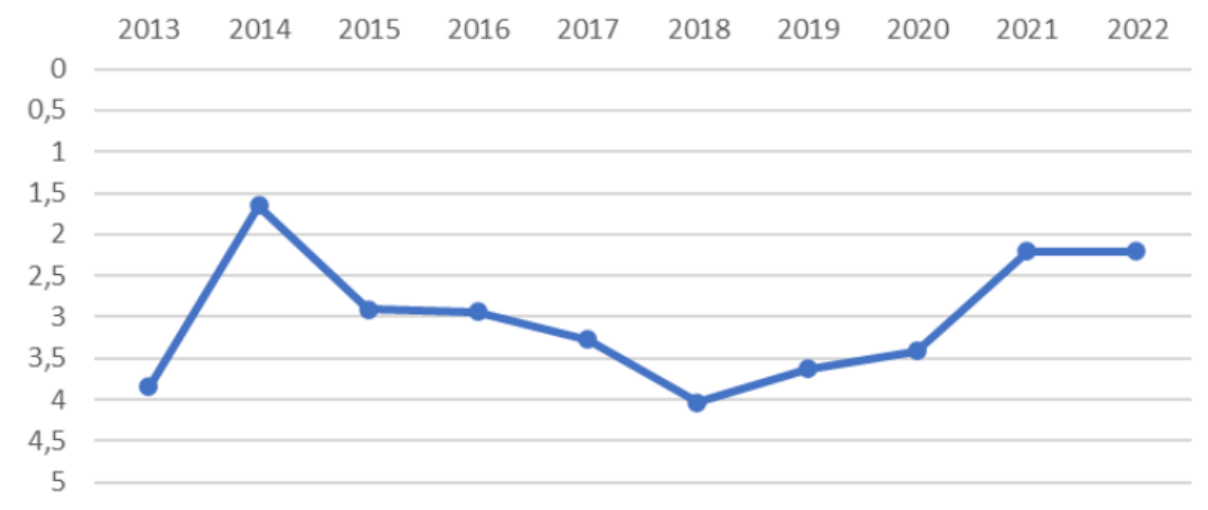
Year	UN peacekeeping funding
2013	3,843
2014	1,657
2015	2,903
2016	2,937
2017	3,274
2018	4,032
2019	3,624
2020	3,411
2021	2,201
2022	2,204

According to the Global Peace Index Map, the calculation of the indicator ‘UN Peacekeeping Funding’ is done as follows: “Calculation of percentage of countries' outstanding contributions versus annual assessment to the budget of the current peacekeeping missions over an average of 3 years. This ratio is derived from the United Nations Committee on Contributions Status reports. Source: Institute for Economics and Peace.” (GPI, 2022).

¹⁹ Url: [Global Peace Index Map » The Most & Least Peaceful Countries \(visionofhumanity.org\)](https://www.visionofhumanity.org/global-peace-index-map-the-most-and-least-peaceful-countries)

The following graph is illustrating the results of the score in Table 4 which shows more distinctively that Vietnam from 2014 had been a regular funder of UN Peacekeeping missions because the percentage of the country’s contributions stated owed had been around 50% for the past 4 years.

Graph 7: Graph presenting Vietnam’s UN peacekeeping funding from 2013 to 2022 according to the score given each year by Global Peace Index.



Defined as an “emerging” middle power (Dinh Tinh 2021; Do, 2022), Vietnam has accelerated international integration and defense diplomacy since 2019. In the last White Paper published (2019 Vietnam National Defense White Paper), Vietnam claimed its willingness to become a successful regional and global actor through the promotion of strategic trust and cooperation and the maintenance of peace and stability. Vietnam also wants to strengthen its national defense and security postures for national defense and construction by “firmly safeguarding territorial sovereignty, independence, self-determination, self-reliance, and national interests” (Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2019). The auto-determination of Vietnam as a country that wants to actively be involved is an important element.

In the 2019 Vietnam National Defense White Paper, there is a clear change in the choice of words when it comes to describing Vietnam's role in the region and throughout the world. The phrase "actively and proactively" is used heavily. Indeed, by comparison with the 2009 Vietnam Defense White Paper, the word 'actively' had been used 15 times in 2009 against 25 times in 2019, and the word 'proactively' had been used 4 times in 2009 against 16 times in 2019. This is a clear demonstration of the willing power to become a proactive agenda-setting middle power.

However, it is only after the COVID-19 pandemic that Vietnam took another turn in terms of the evolution of its identity. Indeed, before the outbreak, Vietnamese leaders have not officially identified the country as a middle power. However, during the 13th National Party Congress, in February 2021, the government set centenary goals of becoming a modern nation (Dinh Tinh and Thu Ngan, 2021). "Because of its achievements in controlling the virus and generating good economic growth, Vietnam's role, position, and brand name were considerably enhanced worldwide in 2020. Vietnam aspires to be a developing country with modern industry by 2025, a developing country with modern industry and upper middle income by 2030, and a developed country with high income by 2045." (Loc 2021, 1420).

Moreover, Vietnam has already realized the identity of an emergent middle power through different aspects; its proactive role in ASEAN that determines a part of its identity and the display of different ranges of diplomacy, the mask diplomacy that I have already introduced in the previous part and the diplomacy of Hearts and Minds. The pandemic of COVID-19 has been a great opportunity for Vietnam to enhance its soft power and take more responsibility globally. Yet the role played by Vietnam inside ASEAN has been proof of the realization of the 'ASEAN way' towards a more global approach. The 'Asian way' has been defined by Southeast Asian leaders and intellectuals to talk about regional cooperation around common

Asian values. It is a way to promote their regional identity, build a community around their own institutions (APEC, EAEC...), and set multilateralism at the wider Asia-Pacific regional level (ASEAN Plus phenomenon, for instance, ASEAN+3 or ASEAN+6). That is how Southeast Asian countries and among them, Vietnam, have been able to have “regional cultural, managerial and ideational autonomy” (Acharya 1997, 321).

This proactive mindset developed itself. And Vietnam became more involved inside the ASEAN for example, concerning the South China Sea disputes or leading the organization through the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the combination of both national resilience and regional community identity must also be considered as Vietnam’s strategic arsenal. It is what Le Dinh Tinh (2021) called the ‘diplomacy of Hearts and Minds’ which promotes “to maximize national interest irrespective of limited capacity” (Dinh Tinh 2021, 330), not by “prevailing the use of force but by making emotional or intellectual appeals to sway supporters of the other side” (Dinh Tinh 2021, 335).

Finally, Vietnam can display other forms of diplomacy thanks to the build-up of its own identity within the realm of national resilience. In that, Higgott (1997) gives the argument that the realists, who didn’t believe in the power of weaker players in the international order, should reconsider. For him, the Vietnam war is the perfect example of “the capabilities of smaller players and the limitations on the capabilities of the superpowers” (Higgott 1997, 35).

5. Conclusion

In my thesis, I have shown that middle powers do matter and can impact great powers' agenda through a semi-agency policy, soft-balancing. Soft-balancing is the practice of four different factors according to Pape (2005): territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, economic strengthening, and signaling of resolve to participate in a balancing coalition. By taking into

account the recent positive evolution of some middle powers after the outbreak of COVID-19, I have demonstrated that middle powers can display soft-balancing in this peculiar context.

My case study about Vietnam shows that a middle power can achieve greater agency vis-à-vis great powers. Not only is Vietnam resolved to build a security coalition (Quad plus) and hold its position on its interest in the East Sea conflict, but also Vietnam takes advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic and has a remarkable new economic status. Moreover, Vietnam displays different ranges of diplomacy, for instance, telephone diplomacy, mask diplomacy, and diplomacy of 'Hearts and Minds', which allows it to gain more power. Thus, the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic profits to the redefinition of Vietnam's security policy vis-à-vis great powers. With its national resources and identity growth within the ASEAN, Vietnam is going towards a globalist and proactive role in the international order. It is a relevant case to emphasize because Vietnam is the perfect example to understand Southeast Asian countries' position in the security dilemma imposed by China and the United States. And Vietnam's case represents an alternative way to approach this matter for Southeast Asian countries.

This redefinition of middle powers' role in the international order is a key element of my analysis, which has the purpose to consider other forms of power within the field of international relations. Indeed, I build my argument on military, diplomatic, and economic evidence, but I also draw on the importance of one country's self-conception, identity, and national resilience. Those elements of analysis are still quite limited in the literature and represent further paths of research to strengthen their significance.

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