

## Smaller states' multidimensional approach to the Indo-Pacific

### INTRODUCTION

#### *The current Indo-Pacific geopolitical framework: the rise of China, big power dynamics and implications for smaller and middle powers*

The regional dynamics of the Indo-Pacific (IP) are particularly relevant in today's geopolitical context, especially in light of China's rise which is creating a reaction among big actors in the region, such as India, Japan, Australia and the US. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between the four countries works towards diversifying their economic relations to balance China and maintain the existing rules-based order in the IP<sup>1</sup>. On the other side, since the 2007/2008 crisis and Xi Jinping's election in 2012 China has been pursuing a more assertive strategy in its engagement within the Indo-Pacific, and South China Sea (SCS) especially, resulting from the gradual rethinking of China's international strategy since Deng Xiaoping's reforms.<sup>2</sup> The strengthening of military powers and building of an important network through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has triggered the reaction of the other actors in the IP.

The US is trying to maintain the rules-based order in balancing China's rise, through a combination of resistance and accommodation. Japan promotes the idea of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) building strategic coalitions and maintaining tactical hedging between China and the US, while pursuing a multilateral strategy by building diversified diplomatic and economic partnerships<sup>3</sup>. FOIP includes political, security, economics and infrastructure investment strategies to address the changing dynamics of the IP. Also India and Australia openly adhere to this FOIP approach. Specifically, Australia aims at expanding an inclusive

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Chubb, 'PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970–2015', *International Security* 45, no. 3 (January 2021): 79–121, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00400](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00400).

<sup>2</sup> Shaun Breslin and Pan Zhongqi, 'Introduction: A Xi Change in Policy?', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23, no. 2 (May 2021): 197–209, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148121992499>.

<sup>3</sup> C. Pajon, 'Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Shaping a Hybrid Regional Order', *Warontherocks*, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/japans-indo-pacific-strategy-shaping-a-hybrid-regional-order/>.

multi-layered system, from the subregional level, focusing on military and economic partnership development<sup>4</sup>, while India is trying to balance between China and the US by engaging in multilateral conversations with small powers<sup>5</sup>. In doing so, big powers engage with small and middle states through multiple minilateral organisations as well as bilateral agreements, in search of aligned partners. These partnerships are important for both sides because great powers play a big role in small states' risk management and economic cooperation building. While they recognise their importance and relevance in the region, individually and collectively, big powers wish to enlarge their 'sphere of influence', pushing smaller states to choose a side in conflicting contexts. On the other hand, 'junior partners' such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines have their own agendas and strategies of engagement in the region, and benefit themselves from these partnerships in terms of military and economic capabilities.

This paper will look at the IP region, with specific attention to the SCS dispute, through middle states' perspective, considering specifically China – Vietnam relations, in order to understand how tensions between the two major powers, namely China and the US, reflect on the broader geopolitical context of the region. The paper will start by exploring the academic literature on the international relations of the Indo-Pacific region, keeping into consideration the different theoretical approaches and frameworks of understanding, such as neorealism, the ASEAN way, and economic interdependence. Following, the paper will demonstrate that smaller states are pursuing a multi-layered strategy to maintain autonomy in the region when faced with changing dynamics caused by China's rise, by analysing the case study of Vietnam and focusing on the recent developments.

Accordingly, smaller countries, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Taiwan, have geostrategic interests concerning the oil and gas resources available in the area, and have put forward historical claims during international conflicts. The essay will go beyond the traditional theories around middle and small state balancing or band wagoning, challenging traditional understandings of security-centred discourses in the SCS. This research will

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<sup>4</sup> Rory Medcalf, 'In Defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia's New Strategic Map', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 4 (8 August 2014): 470–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2014.911814>.

<sup>5</sup> Darshana M. Baruah, 'India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theatre of Opportunity 30 June 2020,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 30 June 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/30/india-in-indo-pacific-new-delhi-s-theater-of-opportunity-pub-82205>.

highlight the active role of middle states in the IP in defending their interests and shaping regional dynamics

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### ***Definition of middle powers/smaller states***

There is no clear and widely accepted definition of middle power, however the term can generally indicate an actor with capabilities and regional power status that are ‘in between’ the great powers and small states. Kim defines middle powers as states that aim at promoting cohesion and stability in the region, and that have relative importance in terms of capacity, influence and international power.<sup>6</sup> Adding to this understanding, is a behavioural trait of such middle powers, which in the same way, defines them as mediators within the hierarchical state-system, in between dominant powers that try and impose their interests, and small powers.<sup>7</sup>

The paper will use the term ‘big powers’ to indicate those states that are established or rising powers in the region, such as the Quad members. In relation to this, the term ‘smaller states’ will refer to those states in the region that are relatively smaller to the big powers in terms of capabilities and influence, such as Vietnam. While recognising their rising position and agency in the changing context of the IP, and the strength that grouping these kinds of states can achieve in shaping regional dynamics, the term smaller states appears more appropriate in describing states adapting their behaviour in the dynamic context of the IP.

The multifaceted dynamics are interrelated in complex ways, hence there are different interpretations that try to describe the evolving situation when looking at smaller states’ behaviour.

### ***The neorealist perspective: big states’ power maximizing behaviours in the IP vs smaller states reacting in response***

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<sup>6</sup> Joo Hee Kim, ‘Making Multilateralism Matter’, in *Asian Geopolitics and the US-China Rivalry*, by Felix Heiduk, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2021), 47–64, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003106814-4>.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Stephen, ‘The Concept and Role of Middle Powers during Global Rebalancing’, *Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, 2013, 36–52.

The neorealist perspective gives insight on the power maximising behaviours between big states and small states in the IP region, which is conceived as a new space of heightened geopolitical competition and intensified economic activity<sup>8</sup>.

Accordingly, China's rise affects the region as a whole, pushing the other actors to having to re-establish a balance. Big powers' actions contribute towards reinforcing the security-based understanding of the IP geopolitical framework, from which the Australia-UK-US partnership (AUKUS) and Quad partnerships have formed. The anarchical international framework of the IP drives big powers' strategy of maximising interests and mitigating risks, while small states' behaviour is described through concepts such as band wagoning, balancing and hedging. Band wagoning is understood as the practice of aligning with a specific side in face of mounting pressures from another, while balancing is used when a country is focused on strengthening its defence capabilities and building alliances<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, hedging means remaining open to various strategic possibilities that can produce counteracting effects in case of future threats, and engagement reflects a country's attempt to insert itself within the existing international order through inclusion and rewards. These concepts are being mostly used to describe smaller states' behaviour in confronting China's rise, especially in the SCS, according to big powers' perspective.<sup>10</sup>

Specifically, the SCS especially is becoming a space of increased militarization where China is inserting itself with more assertiveness. China's growing sovereignty claims in the SCS are based on the presence of approximately 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, the geostrategic convenient route that crosses the SCS, as well as the Spratly and Paracel Island's positioning that can be used for military advantage. The intensified military activities, and construction of military and industrial outposts have sparked the contrasting response of the US and other competing claimant states, such as Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. While China is thinking of establishing an Air Defence Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea, it also claims exclusive passage within its exclusive economic zones (EEZ), but the UNCLOS protects freedom of movement for

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<sup>8</sup> Ash Rossiter and Brendon J Cannon, 'Conflict and Cooperatin in the Indo-Pacific: New Geopolitical Realities', in *Conflict and Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: New Geopolitical Realities*, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Denny Roy, 'Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning?', *ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute* 27, no. 2 (2005): 305–22.

<sup>10</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China Pp. 159–85', *Nstitute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)*, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 30, no. 2 (2008): 159–85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41220503>.

everybody<sup>11</sup>. In response to this, Quad members adopt the FOIP strategy, while smaller states also engage in ways that contribute to shaping the evolving process of the IP.

Accordingly, security-based approaches identify autonomy and protecting sovereignty as smaller states' main foreign policy objectives, and understand them doing so by developing relations with the United States, in military terms especially, while maintaining good relations with China, fostering economic interdependence. Although the underlying assumption of not wanting to antagonize any of the external actors remains valid, this view can become a limiting understanding, because it fails to account for the countries' active pursuit of their interest-oriented agendas. In the mitigation of immediate security risks, neorealist approaches might best explain states' behaviour, but smaller states' mixed strategy approach to long-term geopolitical changes can be encompassed by a wide range of state options and functions. Indeed, apparently counteracting policies, can be implemented contemporarily by smaller South-East Asian (SEA) states, hence combining the benefits of return maximizing and risk contingency strategies<sup>12</sup>. Specifically, the paper will analyse other strategic activities such as building partnerships with influential states and smaller groupings, promoting common goal through multilateral organisations, and utilising diverse public spaces to spread their ideas.

### ***The ASEAN way: regional grouping for diversifying partnerships and coordinating strategies***

Smaller SEA states' behaviour is influenced by regional institutions and groupings of which they are part, and that they use as a platform from which they can put forward and pursue their agendas. ASEAN, for example, provides the perfect space for cooperation among smaller states which can consult each other within a joint body of governance of economic and socio-political relations. Its driving principles of non-alignment, non-interference in other countries' internal matters and consensus building are based on equal representation and participation, and are aligned with the 'five principles of peaceful coexistence'. The institution's main foreign policy objective, which coincides both with the individual states' interests as well as the communal goal, is that of maintaining regional stability by pursuing neutrality. While preserving and respecting the different interests and identities of the countries, ASEAN aims at developing region-wide cooperation, and preventing polarisation<sup>13</sup>. This is relevant for

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<sup>11</sup> Centre for Preventive Action, 'Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea', *Global Conflict Tracker*, April 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Kuik, 'The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China Pp. 159–85'.

<sup>13</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective', *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (December 2021): 300–315, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>.

understanding the states' 'non-aligned' policies as part of their broader goal in searching autonomy. In other words, the institution's commitment to impartiality and autonomy promotes multilateral partnerships, strengthening a common strategy of SEA states, against the US-China rivalry. ASEAN is in fact pursuing relations on both sides, by strengthening cooperative security relations with the US (through ASEAN Regional Forum, ADMM+, involving Quad members, ASEAN's Outlook on the IP), while fostering mutually beneficial relations with China. On the other side, the individual states are adapting policy choices and priorities to the changing IP context in a way that contributes to forge the conception of "ASEAN centrality" and autonomy<sup>14</sup>.

The relationship between smaller states and China or the US is understood through both their collective identity and interests as part of the ASEAN community, or bilaterally within their domestic spheres. For example, China can invest in strengthening its relations with states through engagement with ASEAN to try and distract individual states from matters such as the SCS, while on the other side, ASEAN states pursue common goals improving cooperation between each other and promoting common goals.<sup>15</sup> ASEAN states are in fact committed to respecting and implementing the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), as well as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in SEA. Although this *ASEAN perspective* informs smaller states behaviour, internal division prevents a united stance of the institution's members, hence confirming the discontinuities between arrangements and implementation. This does not take away the relevance and importance of ASEAN's united public discourse.

### ***Economic interdependence: the BRI, risks and benefits for smaller states***

Furthermore, smaller states engage with other actors through economic interdependence. The participation in economic forums and organisations entail a basic level of trust that allows for cooperation and a common goal to reach to mutual benefit. This further expands the understanding of smaller states' behaviour in placing them within a framework of economic collaboration as part of their national strategies. On one hand, the pursuit of good economic relations requires collaboration from all sides including diplomatic and political coordination. For example, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a Chinese-led initiative that promotes an

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<sup>14</sup> Renato Cruz De Castro, 'Under the Shadow of the Giants: The ASEAN in Search of a Common Strategy in a Fluid and Perilous Indo-Pacific Region', *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 2 (June 2022): 282–301, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911211014598>.

<sup>15</sup> De Castro.

inclusive architecture of infrastructure, membership and cooperation, from which all actors involved should benefit. On the other hand, states need to engage in a way that will not get them entangled amidst the strategic ambiguity of great powers.<sup>16</sup> Although the BRI is beneficial for states in terms of receiving foreign direct investments, increasing exports, and developing infrastructure projects, the risks of becoming economically dependent and falling under the Chinese sphere of influence are concrete and need to inform smaller states' approaches towards big states<sup>17</sup>.

At the same time, the mutual benefits of the relationship are achieved only through bilateral collaboration. In other words, China also needs to cautiously work with smaller states, balancing constraints with benefits in a way that is not too assertive, or it will risk pushing smaller countries towards their competitors instead. This is already happened with Vietnam, for example, who is becoming concerned about the SCS situation and is broadening its partnerships by participating in the informal grouping led by the US, the Quad+, which occupies itself with restructuring the supply chains outside of China's influence<sup>18</sup>.

## **HYPOTHESIS**

***Smaller states have and active role in shaping the geopolitical dynamics of the region, they are not just stand-bys, but fundamental actors that influence big powers' strategies, while pursuing national objectives through different channels to maintain their autonomy***

The political processes that have created the concept of the IP as a region, and consequently the emergence of theories and strategies on the regional dynamics to explain state behaviour, rely on different perspectives. Considering these perspectives together, thus the FOIP, the ASEAN way, the BRI, provides for a comprehensive overview of the dynamics shaping the region, characterised by conflict and cooperation. The BRI provides an alternative vision to the security-centred approach upon which the FOIP is based, which focuses on divisions and exclusivity<sup>19</sup>, while the ASEAN way provides another framework of understanding based on the importance of common goals and coordinated action towards maintaining autonomy.

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<sup>16</sup> Sung Chul Jung, Jaehyon Lee, and Ji-Yong Lee, 'The Indo-Pacific Strategy and US Alliance Network Expandability: Asian Middle Powers' Positions on Sino-US Geostrategic Competition in Indo-Pacific Region', *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 127 (2 January 2021): 53–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1766909>.

<sup>17</sup> Mohan J Malik, *China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative and Southeast Asia: Dilemmas, Doubts and Determination* (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Alexander L. Vuving, 'The Evolution of Vietnamese Foreign Policy in the Doi Moi Era', *Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press*, February 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Rossiter and Cannon, 'Conflict and Cooperatin in the Indo-Pacific: New Geopolitical Realities'.

Smaller powers can, in fact, help create and maintain a peaceful and stable order based on multilateral cooperation, by adopting creative forms of diplomatic engagement, while still pursuing national interests.<sup>20</sup> Their main objectives are maintaining security and promoting prosperity in the region in their own autonomy, without having to rely on big powers or be forced into decision. However, as they are found in between the US-China rivalry their strategy of pursuing their national interests needs to consider regional dynamics and all possible related risks and consequences. Following this logic, Jung argues that SE Asian middle powers are actually aiming at taming rather than containing or balancing China, by bringing forward their voices<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, Kuik describes smaller states' behaviour of adopting different strategies at the same time as a combination of 'economic pragmatism, binding engagement, limited band wagoning, dominance denial, and indirect balancing'<sup>22</sup>.

### **CASE STUDY: VIETNAM**

*Vietnam is a rising state in the IP that finds itself having to act in between the US-China rivalry, hence adopts a multidimensional approach to the changing situation in order to maintain its autonomy*

In order to fully understand the argument of the essay and grasp the complex dynamics that shape the relationship between big powers and smaller states, the paper will analyse the case of Vietnam, a country which is becoming increasingly relevant in the current IP context.

Vietnam is a key partner for both China and the US, in terms of economic and diplomatic cooperation, strategic location and common interests. On one hand, it participates in China's development and partnerships building processes through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). On the other hand, the US promotes its strategic vision of the FOIP to counter the effects of the rise of China in the region and try and build beneficial connections. It aligns to a certain extent to AOIP, and Vietnam's defence and security strategy outlined in the country's 2019 National Defence White Paper<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Kim, 'Making Multilateralism Matter'.

<sup>21</sup> Jung, Lee, and Lee, 'The Indo-Pacific Strategy and US Alliance Network Expandability'.

<sup>22</sup> Kuik, 'The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China Pp. 159–85'.

<sup>23</sup> Tran Hoang Long and Tran Thi Hai Yen, 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Vietnamese Perspective', *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 2 (June 2021): 159–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284211005037>.



In terms of defence and security, FOIP and Vietnam both share the same security strategy towards the SCS in supporting freedom of navigation and improving defence mechanisms, with the aim of maintaining the current regional order and ASEAN's central role in the regional security architecture. Moreover, the US has become Vietnam's leading source of foreign direct investments (FDIs), has proposed that Vietnam become part of the Quad Plus, while the two countries are already participants in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

On the other side, unresolved disputes in the SCS over the Paracel and Spratly islands, and the presence of pro-Chinese countries such as Cambodia encircling Vietnam are of concern to Vietnam's intentions of maintaining sovereignty and political autonomy from the rising neighbouring power<sup>24</sup>. China's rising assertiveness has coincided with Vietnam's formulation of its 'all people's national defence' strategy based on the enhancement and modernization of naval and air capabilities, self-help development of its national defence industry, and employing national defence diplomacy. In other words, Vietnam's response to China's growing assertiveness through modernization wants to demonstrate its confidence and capacity of maintaining its autonomy<sup>25</sup>.

Furthermore, in Vietnam's most recent 2019 national defence White Paper the country confirms that it will take part in defence and cooperation measures in the IP, unofficially implying its support for the US's vision, while also establishing defence relationships with over 80 countries and IOs. Although this might signal an alignment with the US, Vietnam remains cautious of its intentions especially after the US-Vietnam war, hence adopting the same tactics of engagement and struggle, trying not to get caught up in that binary choice that the US's IP strategy seems to offer. Accordingly, the White Paper is based on its 'three nos' defence policy, which forbids to form alliances, construct foreign military bases, and conduct foreign military activities on national soil<sup>26</sup>.

Nevertheless, engagement with China in search of a peaceful and stable relationship is necessary given the country's proximity and the advantages of economic interdependence, especially considered the opportunities presented with the BRI. Therefore, as part of the

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<sup>24</sup> Tran Truong Thuy, ed., 'Vietnam's Relations with China and the US and the Role of ASEAN', in *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector*, NIDS Joint Research Series, no. 9 (International Workshop on Asia Pacific Security, Tokyo: The National Institute for Defense Studies, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, 'Vietnam's Strategy of "Cooperating and Struggling" with China over Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 3, no. 2 (August 2016): 200–220, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797016645453>.

<sup>26</sup> Derek Grossman, *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Vietnam* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR4412.6>.

strategy for receiving increased economic benefits, Vietnam has adopted the *Doi Moi* economic renovation, and pursued multilateralism to expand its economic and political partnerships. Specifically, it has formed strategic partnerships with the US, China, Japan, Russia, India, while joining major global institutions<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, Vietnam is also an important participant of international organizations such as the East Asian Summit, APEC, AIIB ADB, RCEP, CPTPP. Its increasingly influential position in the sub-region of mainland SEA is enhanced by the country's participation in established institutions such as ASEAN, which provides for a platform of policy alignment with other states, coordinated economic and defence strategies, and promoting its image in the international. For example, Vietnam covered a key role in drafting the Code of Conduct for the SCS, although it is a non-binding agreement. Moreover, Vietnam and Indonesia are two countries of increasing relevance in the IP that are aligned in different aspects and have found common ground in ASEAN, specifically on maritime issues<sup>28</sup>.

Therefore Vietnam, finding itself in between China – US competition, wishes not to be caught up in other countries' affairs, which interfere in its own interests. Good relations with big powers in the region are fundamental and mutually beneficial, although ties with these determine their constant struggle for autonomy between preserving their interests and external forces. With ASEAN not being united enough to take a stance in balancing China and the US, Vietnam strategically defends its territories and interests by diversifying and multiplying partnerships to their interest, increasingly taking a stance while surrounded by big powers.

Balancing between pursuing its national interests and hedging the US-China rivalry, Vietnam's restabilizing strategy translates into decisions that are neither too close nor antagonistic to the big powers. The uncertainties that arose are the product of the disequilibrium caused by the rise of China, which Vietnam is trying to address by making policy choices that will guarantee strategic autonomy, hence shaping the Indo-Pacific<sup>29</sup>.

Vietnam is engaging with countries and groups through different channels contemporarily as part of its 'struggle and engage' strategy, which aims at diversifying responses according to the different frameworks of understanding of the same changing reality

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<sup>27</sup> Ann Marie Murphy, 'Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Southeast Asian Foreign Policy: Exploring the Linkages', *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2 September 2017): 165–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2017.1354566>.

<sup>28</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Vietnam Tacks Between Cooperation and Struggle in the South China Sea Asia' (Crisis Group Asia, 7 December 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Murphy, 'Great Power Rivalries, Domestic Politics and Southeast Asian Foreign Policy'.

of the IP, hence not risking alignment with one side rather than the other and maintaining its autonomy. We can see this behaviour in the most immediate situation regarding the SCS.

In early May 2014 China deployed the oil rig HYSY 981 in Vietnam's EEZ for oil exploration purposes. The action was unexpected and unprovoked, and ended up creating a diplomatic crisis between the two countries because China for the first time did not ask Vietnam's permission before entering its EEZ. In addition, the oil rig was accompanied by coast guard vessels, tugs boats, and fishing trawlers, reaching overall more than 100 ships in a few days, adding to military and other aircraft. After 6 months of prolonged crisis and organised meetings between the two parties' delegations, China withdrew the oil rig from Vietnamese waters and released 13 Vietnamese fishermen that it had arrested earlier. China wanted to use the occupation of the oil rig as leverage to obtain other benefits in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, Vietnam took a position when seeing its autonomy and national interests put at risk. It strategically avoided direct armed conflict with China by not deploying warships and keeping them out of the contended area, in defending its sovereignty and interests.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, alongside the diplomatic discussions between the two parties, the assertive action in 2014 in the SCS dispute fuelled anti-Chinese propaganda and sentiments throughout Vietnam, and resulted in anti-Chinese protest, boycotts, hence having economic repercussion and damaging Chinese industries in Vietnam and China's image and public relations. Therefore, while China seeks to establish a wide network of Chinese economic activities in Vietnam, it has to take into account the domestic sphere of Vietnam, which interacts with the international sphere, determining foreign policy choices. The dispute could have also led to legal repercussions against China according to the UNCLOS.

Faced with increased tensions in the SCS due to recurring episodes of China entering Vietnam's EEZs, the latter has decided to respond publicly by holding a commemorating ceremony for the 34th anniversary of a battle against the Chinese navy in the Gac Ma reef/Johnson South reef of the SCS. This action shows that Vietnam is not afraid of taking a stance in important issues, by utilizing the multiple platforms that it has access to. It has not openly addressed issues against China in this matter, but is showing that maintaining its autonomy is its top priority, while still being willing to collaborate.

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<sup>30</sup> Thayer, 'Vietnam's Strategy of "Cooperating and Struggling" with China over Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea'.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the different theoretical frameworks help us understand different challenges that smaller states in the region need to keep in mind. Specifically, big powers tend to understand the IP dynamics through security and defence matters, while international institutions such as ASEAN push individual states to pursue peace and cooperation. At the same time, the states involved in the region are all tied by economic interdependence, which can continue to be mutually beneficial in a stable and collaborative environment. Therefore, the behaviour of smaller states in the IP cannot be merely understood as a reaction to China's rise in an attempt to mitigate its effects on the region as a whole. Rather, with other bigger states worrying about the shift in power relations that China's assertiveness might cause, smaller states can take advantage of this changing situation to pursue their national interests. The choices and constraints in the IP context determine the ways in which these smaller states adapt their priorities in the changing reality of the region while pursuing their struggle for autonomy. At the same time, the different channels of understanding and engagement can help smaller states diversify their actions in search for the best outcome. This is visible in the case of Vietnam, which is enhancing economic interdependence with big powers as well as with smaller regional powers, increasing its military and defence capabilities, and coordinating actions through ASEAN. The country's overall improvement and diversification strategy serves to address immediate security issues in the SCS but also to maintain autonomy in the long-term. Amidst enhanced big states' power rivalry in the region, smaller states have more space for manoeuvre to pursue their own objectives.

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