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Great Powers Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region and Its Impact on Vietnam's Strategy

Son T. Nguyen  

Institute of Political Economy, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, Hanoi, Vietnam

FPT University, Hanoi, Vietnam

 nguyenthanhson.ktct@hcmu.edu.vn

Abstract. At the end of the 20th century, many researchers had envisioned a world where countries shift from political and military competition towards economic competition. However, the prospect of a world without conflict was short-lived, as the concerns about political tensions were revived in the early 21st century. Great powers such as the United States, China and Russia, have all shifted their focus to Asia, in particular the Indo-Pacific region. As a developing country in this region, Vietnam has its reasons to pay close attention to the competition among these great powers. Based on the theory of defensive realism, the author examines the reorientation of the US, Chinese and Russian foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region from Vietnam's perspective. It shows that the US pivot to the region is set to challenge the rise of China and to maintain the US position as the leader of the world, China's expanding influence is to reclaim its historical position in the region and Russia seeks to diversify its political and economic relations. In this context, Vietnam should maintain its multi-vector foreign policy, balancing the interests of several countries. In addition, Vietnam needs to strengthen its position in the global economy through participation in new-generation free trade agreements, expand the scope and forms of its diplomacy, and play a more active role in the global community. All these, in the author's opinion, will enable Vietnam to strengthen its position in the global economy and boost its diplomatic activities.

Key words: great powers competition, Indo-Pacific, Vietnam, the U.S., Russia, China, geopolitics, geoeconomics, geostrategy, pivot to Asia

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Соперничество великих держав в Индо-Тихоокеанском регионе и его влияние на стратегию Вьетнама

С.Т. Нгуен  

Институт политической экономики, Национальная политическая академия им. Хо Ши Мина, Ханой, Вьетнам
Университет FPT, Ханой, Вьетнам
nguyenthanhson.ktct@hcma.edu.vn

Аннотация. В конце XX в., после окончания холодной войны, многие исследователи пришли к выводу, что государства постепенно переходят от политического и военного соперничества к противостоянию преимущественно в экономической сфере. Однако перспектива мира без конфликтов оказалась недолгой, и в начале XXI в. начался рост политической напряженности. Одним из ее центров стал Индо-Тихоокеанский регион, где столкнулись интересы различных великих держав, таких как США, Китай и Россия. Региональные державы, например Вьетнам, оказались в эпицентре этого соперничества. Опираясь на теорию оборонительного реализма, автор рассматривает переориентацию внешней политики США, Китая и России на Индо-Тихоокеанский регион с точки зрения Вьетнама. Показано, что «поворот» США к Индо-Тихоокеанскому региону направлен на сдерживание Китая и сохранение позиции США как мирового лидера, в то время как Китай стремится восстановить свое историческое положение в регионе, а Россия — диверсифицировать свои политические и экономические отношения. Автор приходит к выводу, что Вьетнаму необходимо сохранять свой многовекторный внешнеполитический курс, балансируя между интересами нескольких стран. Кроме того, Вьетнаму следует стремиться к укреплению своих позиций в мировой экономике посредством участия в соглашениях о свободной торговле нового поколения, расширения масштабов и форм дипломатии, а также поддержания статуса активного актора в мировом сообществе. Все это, по мнению автора, позволит Вьетнаму укрепить свои позиции в мировой экономике и стимулировать дипломатическую активность.

Ключевые слова: соперничество великих держав, Индо-Тихоокеанский регион, Вьетнам, США, Россия, Китай, геополитика, геоэкономика, геостратегия, поворот к Азии

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

After the Cold war has ended at the end of the 20th century, many researchers believed that the world will change from a confrontational, bipolar state to a new, more peaceful period. The risk of a heated political conflict or military clash was expected to reduce dramatically, as countries opted to pursue more open and integrated foreign relations with each other. In the early 1990s, the president of the United States George H.W. Bush envisioned a new world organization led by the U.S. that was “freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace.”¹ Academics laid out the vision of the

world where countries will shift from using military operations and political interference towards using the economic tools to promote and protect national interests (Blackwill & Harris, 2016).

It all seemed true for a while, as the collapse of the Soviet Union helped the U.S. and its European allies (the West) establish the superior economic and militaristic position relative to the rest of the world. Most of the former socialist countries have transitioned to the market economy and increased their connectivity with the West. Accordingly, the risk of using political and military tools to interfere in national affairs has been reduced.

¹ Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis and the Federal Budget Deficit //

George Bush Presidential Library and Museum. September 11, 1990. URL: <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2217> (accessed: 04.08.2022).

A greater openness has created more economic activities between countries. As economies become more interconnected, economic competition has gradually replaced political competition. Although economic competition between countries can be as fierce as political one, the major difference is that the former is usually viewed as a positive-sum game, whereas the latter is a zero-sum game (Vihma, 2018, p. 4). In other words, economic competition allows for a win-win scenario between countries involved.

However, the prospect of a world without political conflict was short-lived. The concerns about political tensions were revived in the early 21st century. They were shaped by the events such as the shift in the US foreign policy in response to 9/11; questions around the peaceful rise of China; growing contradictions in relations between Russia and Western countries. It is these tensions that have recently been dubbed as “Cold War 2.0” situation.²

One of the regions, facing political tensions, has been Asia, in particular the Indo-Pacific region (IPR). The interests of various powers have collided there, with the great powers such as the United States, China and Russia being the most prominent. Their foreign policy activities in Asia are not ignored by regional players, including such a country as Vietnam.

In this article, the author attempts to examine the process of reorientation of US, Chinese and Russian foreign policy towards the IPR and Vietnam’s attitude towards this process. To do so, the author uses the defensive realism theory (Waltz, 1979). According to this theory, most states seek a status quo and limit themselves to concentrate on maintaining the balance of power. The goal of states is not power, but security and maintaining their

position in the system; therefore, what states need is an “appropriate amount” of power in order to achieve their goals.

Literature Review

The shift of major powers in the world towards Asia has been of interest for many researchers. Tellis (2020b, p. 124) showed that the emergence of the Indo-Pacific strategy in the U.S. has been mainly because of China. The U.S. has identified that China is seeking to displace the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region in the near-term, and to achieve the global of preeminence in the future. As such, the US Indo-Pacific strategy includes geopolitical, economic and military realms to prevent this from happening. In geopolitical terms, the goal is to neutralize China’s threat by implementing a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.” In economic terms, along with stimulating domestic economy, the U.S. needs to prevent continued Chinese trade exploitation, reconfigure regional trade networks, and oppose Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as China’s vehicle for influence. Lastly, from military point of view, the U.S. needs to ensure the effective defense of its allies in Indo-Pacific and strengthen the cooperation with regional partners’ militaries (Tellis, 2020b).

Scott (2018, p. 19) pointed out another key feature of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, which is using one rising power (India) to help constrain another rising power (China). He also highlighted, that the U.S. started paying more attention to China back in the years of B. Obama’s presidency, when the “Rebalance to Asia” or “Pivot to Asia” strategy was proposed (Scott, 2018).

Cooper and Shearer (2017, p. 305) described China’s focus on Indo-Pacific region as a grand strategy to transition from a continental power to a maritime power, through strengthening its ability to deny “near seas” to US forces and building capabilities to project power into “far seas.” China’s strategy focuses on gaining influence through BRI, which

² Traub J. Cold War 2.0 Is Ushering In Nonalignment 2.0 // Foreign Policy. July 9, 2022. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/09/nonalignment-us-china-cold-war-ukraine-india-global-south/> (accessed: 04.08.2022).

expands the economic connections across the Eurasian landmass and the Indian Ocean.

Hu and Meng (2020, p. 143) indicated that China actually implemented BRI as a response to US “Pivot to Asia,” with the aim to expand Chinese economic power along the ancient Silk Roads on land and sea. However, China has not taken tit-for-tat action to respond to the US more recent “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy. Instead, China is showing a more constructive approach to mitigate national security risks while continuing to extend its international influence in the Indo-Pacific region. While China’s rise has been mostly peaceful so far, there are still concerns about the country’s ambition among its neighbors.³

As China and the U.S. are shifting their attention to the Indo-Pacific region, academics are also interested in how other countries in the region positioned themselves in this competition. Rajagopalan (2020, p. 75) studied increasing focus by India on Indo-Pacific region in the past decade. Although India is reluctant to admit that the main driver behind this focus is China, its tightening relation with the U.S. and Japan clearly points to the fact that this is yet another subset of its China policy. Koga (2019, p. 286) pointed out that Japan was actually the initiator of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” in 2016. This was considered as a “tactical hedging” by Japan against China’s growing economic power and political influence in Asia. However, Japan will soon need to clarify its political stance — between America’s hardline and the Association of South East Asian Nations’ (ASEAN) aim to facilitate cooperation — towards China. Jung, Lee, and Lee (Jung, Lee J. & Lee J.-Y., 2021) focused on other Asian middle powers, such as Vietnam, Indonesia and South Korea, who face a similar strategic dilemma — supporting the

US anti-China initiatives or positioning itself as a partner of both sides. The authors showed that on the one hand, these countries are reluctant to join the US strategy for Indo-Pacific region, on the other hand, they aim to tame, rather than contain China.

Detailed Analysis on Pivot by Great Powers towards Indo-Pacific Region

Aside from China and the U.S., who are directly involved in competition for influence in the Indo-Pacific, from Vietnam’s perspective, there is another significant player which is Russia. Russia was a historical ally for Vietnam during its struggle against external influence in the past. This section will analyze in more details the pivot towards Indo-Pacific region by three major economies: the U.S., China and Russia.

The United States

In the current context, the U.S. is no longer the world’s sole superpower, however, in comparison with other great powers, it is clearly the leading one (Cohen, 2015, p. 123). According to Blackwill and Harris (2016, p. 255), the US grand strategy has to satisfy the conditions of five vital and eight extremely important national interests, with the aim to safeguard and enhance the US position in the world.

Before shifting attention to Asia, the U.S. had decades of focusing on the Middle East due to the war on terror. The “Rebalance to Asia” strategy in 2011 was set up to establish a multilateral cooperation on shared security issues, such as humanitarian assistance, disaster response and freedom of navigation in Asia (Davidson, 2014, p. 77). The “pivot” or “rebalance” does not mean that the U.S. is leaving their traditional allies in Europe or East Asia in search for new ones, but rather the redistribution of its diplomatic, economic and military resources to Asia, after a considerable period of neglecting this region. Big part of this strategy was to deal with the rise of China, but

³ Daly R., Rojansky M. China’s Global Dreams Give Its Neighbors Nightmares // *Foreign Policy*. March 12, 2018. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/12/chinas-global-dreams-are-giving-its-neighbors-nightmares/> (accessed: 05.08.2022).

other concerns such as the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, anti-terrorism and anti-piracy efforts may involve too.

After the announcement of BRI in 2013 by China, the U.S. doubled down on their pivot to Asia with “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy. Tellis (2020a) listed at least five domains in which the US pivot towards Indo-Pacific is set to challenge China:

— resist China’s growing influence in the Indo-Pacific rim-land and maintain the freedom and openness in this region;

— take a tougher stance to oppose China’s economic behavior, which in turn has manifested into the trade war between the two countries;

— prevent China from creating alternative technological standards that compete with those established in the West;

— confront China’s attempt for technological dominance in the global system;

— strengthen the military capabilities of the U.S. and its allies to deter China in the region (the Pentagon is asking Congress for more than 15 billion USD in 2023 to build up military competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. It is estimated that this number will grow to 21.7 billion USD in 2025⁴).

The U.S. sets out the vision of multilateral cooperation between 35 economies in the Indo-Pacific region, based on the values of collective peace and prosperity. That is to ensure free and fair trade, unrestricted capital flows, effective institution and freedom of navigation in the region.⁵ The strategic alliance that is the core for the US Indo-Pacific strategy is the Quad, with participation of Australia, Japan, India and the U.S.

⁴ Detsch J. Biden Budget Expected to Stiff the Indo-Pacific // Foreign Policy. March 9, 2023. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/09/us-military-china-taiwan-pentagon/> (accessed: 29.04.2023).

⁵ A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision // U.S. Department of State. November 3, 2019. P. 4. URL: <https://www.state.gov/a-free-and-open-indo-pacific-advancing-a-shared-vision/> (accessed: 29.04.2023).

Later, the Joe Biden administration created the AUKUS bloc (United States, United Kingdom, and Australia). The creation of this alliance was a further development of the US policy to contain China in the region. In addition, countries, that take a tougher stance than others on the issue of containing China, were involved in this bloc.⁶ Furthermore, the Biden administration even pushed for more containment of China through technological decoupling by announcing new export controls on semiconductors and supercomputers to China,⁷ as well as seeking to strengthen commitments with traditional allies such as Japan and South Korea.⁸

Along with promoting new initiatives to contain China in the IPR, ideologically, the U.S. portrays China as an irresponsible global power, with “han-centric” ideology, that lacks anti-racism culture and oppresses democracy and religious freedom. This leads to a form of “hypernationalism” that considers Chinese culture as superior to others’ (Friend & Thayer, 2018).

Thus, the U.S. seeks to maintain its leadership in the region through the creation of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” while trying to contain China’s military, political and economic growth. This policy is met with criticism from Beijing, which considers the American government as the largest “bully” in the world that has no moral authority to preach any other country.⁹

⁶ Mohan V. Interpretation of QUAD and AUKUS in Indo-Pacific Region // The Geopolitics. March 26, 2022. URL: <https://thegeopolitics.com/interpretation-of-quad-and-aucus-in-the-indo-pacific-region/> (accessed: 06.08.2022).

⁷ China’s Chip Industry Set for Deep Pain from US Export Controls // Financial Times. October 8, 2022. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/e950f58c-0d8f-4121-b4f2-ece71d2cb267> (accessed: 29.04.2023).

⁸ Joe Biden Bids to Boost Alliances in Asia and Affirm Commitment to Region // Financial Times. May 18, 2022. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/2757f49b-e706-431f-af75-60239670dfe7> (accessed: 29.04.2023).

⁹ Commentary: Washington: The World’s Biggest Bully // People’s Daily Online. March 18, 2022. URL:

Regarding this issue, Vietnam has a very unique experience with both the U.S. and China. In relation to China, Vietnam has the experience of thousand years of diplomacy, enough to understand China's ambition. And Vietnam also has the largest conflict in its history with the U.S. just in the past century. This helps Vietnam to form its own stand on the issue, rather than being drawn to choose sides in this competition between two great powers.

China

Since China regained its independence, each generation of China's leaders has come up with a personal slogan or ideology, bearing the leader's personal imprint on the national development strategy. The first leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong, used a synthesis of the ideas of Marxism-Leninism and Chinese philosophy in his political activities, which became known later as "Maoism." Deng Xiaoping proposed the theory of "reform and opening up" to build and stabilize the economy. More recent generations of Chinese leaders have also put forward some ideas, such as Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" theory or Hu Jintao's view of "Scientific Development Outlook." China's current leader Xi Jinping introduced the idea of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. The ambitious long-term plans presented in this idea made Xi Jinping the third leader to issue "historic resolution," after only Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.¹⁰

Through every generation of China's leaders, one geopolitical goal has always been consistent, which is the renaissance of the country's global power status. In the period before 2000, when the country's economic

strength was not commensurate with the status of a global power, China chose a rather quiet development strategy. As stated in Deng Xiaoping's theory in 1990, it is to "hide your strength, bide your time."¹¹ In this strategy, China has been less active in international affairs, concentrating on economic development. However, from the 2000s onwards, when the scale of Chinese economy expanded dramatically, the country has gradually revealed its ambition to become the leader of the world in specific fields. In particular, Xi Jinping's thought on realizing the "Chinese dream" or the goal of becoming the world's leading power by the middle of the 21st century, has openly declared these ambitions to the world.¹²

The BRI is one of the main tools that China uses to realize its geopolitical goals. This is one of the most ambitious projects in the world, expected to cover more than 70 countries, with a third of world GDP; 2/3 of the world's population; 40% of total global trade; and receive 35% of the world's total foreign direct investments (FDI). The BRI includes six land transport corridors, a maritime Silk Road through the Indian and Pacific Oceans and a Northern Silk Road through the Arctic Ocean. The total value of BRI projects is expected to be around 4—8 trillion USD. Through the BRI, China aims to increase its influence with countries in the Indo-Pacific. This is a region with strategic significance in the world, with presence of three of the world's largest economies, the U.S., China, and Japan; accounts for 60% of global GDP; and 60% of global maritime trade (Ruta et al., 2019, p. 4).

<http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0318/c90000-9972852.html> (accessed: 29.04.2023).

¹⁰ Chasing the Chinese Dream // *The Economist*. May 4, 2013. URL: <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2013/05/04/chasing-the-chinese-dream> (accessed: 06.08.2022).

¹¹ Liu hua qiu Deng xiao ping wai jiao si xiang yong fang guang hua // Gong chan dang yuan wang [Liu Huaqiu Deng Xiaoping's Thought on Diplomacy Will Shine Forever // Communist Party Member Network]. August 15, 2014. (In Chinese). URL: <https://news.12371.cn/2014/08/15/ARTI1408082493450926.shtml> (accessed: 12.04.2023).

¹² Xi Jinping Signals Departure from Low-Profile Policy // *Financial Times*. October 20, 2017. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/05cd86a6-b552-11e7-a398-73d59db9e399> (accessed: 06.08.2022).

The BRI uses mainly economic and financial tools to expand China's presence in the region. Apart from gigantic infrastructure projects as economic incentives to attract other countries, China can also use economic sanctions to deter countries from acting against its national interest. For example, economic sanctions have been imposed on the Philippines since 2012 due to disputes in the South China Sea. China is the destination for 14% of Philippines' total banana exports, and trade sanctions had significant cost to Philippines' economy. Later, China also cut flights to the Philippines, causing a sharp drop in the number of tourists to the country. Only when the Philippines took steps to ease the tensions between two countries in 2016, China removed these non-tariff barriers. Soon after, in 2017, the Philippines' banana exports grew by 30% and the tourism industry grew by 43% (Harrell, Rosenberg & Saravalle, 2018, p. 44).

In contrast, the countries that cooperate with China will receive generous financial support. During the 2000—2014 period, China provided 14.9 billion USD in Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Asia, of which Southeast Asia received 30.1%. Cambodia, one of China's closest allies in the region, received more than 3 billion USD during this period (Oh, 2020, p. 226). Myanmar and Indonesia also regularly receive aid from China during natural disasters, floods or earthquakes. Most recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China also implemented a vaccine diplomacy strategy for Southeast Asia. Laos and Cambodia are countries that have received a lot of support in medical equipment, information sharing and vaccines against COVID-19.¹³

Recently, China has shown its commitment in using free-trade agreements (FTA) and economic regionalism to deepen its linkages

with partners in the Pacific region. This strategy of "Free trade area of Asia-Pacific" (FTAAP) is considered by Chinese policy makers as the network of FTA that is able to provide impetus for new momentum of economic growth and integration in the region (Lei & Sui, 2022). This is evident in the conclusion of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in late 2020, and actively seeking to join Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) by China.

From Vietnam's perspective, China's strategy provides many opportunities to benefit from economic investments, especially investments in infrastructure. However, researchers are also concerned about the cost of China's financial assistance. While it comes with fewer conditionalities than other sources of international finance, it may lead to debt traps that involve more than just financial payments. Allegedly, Tajikistan had to give up some of the disputed land with China in 2011 or Sri Lanka leasing Hambantota port to China for 99 years, due to unsettled debt (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2019, p. 155). But regardless of whether Vietnam joins the BRI or not, the country can still benefit from the initiative's connectivity, given its close geographic proximity to China.

Russia

Russia no longer has the superpower status it once had under the Soviet era, but the country's political and military influence still put it firmly as a great power in the world.

In the 1990s, Russia implemented the shock therapy to quickly transition from a centrally planned economy towards market economy, aligning itself closer with the West. However, Russia's transition did not generate desired effect of economic growth and prosperity, but instead came with slow growth and persistent inflation. The emphasis on developing relations only with Western countries has led to a reduction of Russia's position in its traditional spheres of influence.

¹³ Vannarith Ch. Fighting COVID-19: China's Soft Power Opportunities in Mainland Southeast Asia // *Asialink*. May 27, 2021. URL: <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/fighting-covid-19-chinas-soft-power-opportunities-in-mainland-southeast-asia> (accessed: 07.08.2022).

Thus, since 2000 with the arrival of President Putin, Russia has shifted its strategy from joining the world order under the leadership of the West, towards becoming the counterweight to the West. For example, Moscow began to use a pragmatic combination of both geopolitical and geo-economic tools in relation to the European Union (EU), abandoning the idealistic approach of the 1990s (Wigell & Vihma, 2016, p. 605).

While most of the focus for Russia's strategy lies in Europe, it also showed interests in extending the relation with Asia-Pacific countries. When Russia's pivot to Asia was launched within the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, its goals were described as the development of the Russian Far East and the diversification of economic ties with the Asia-Pacific.¹⁴ Karaganov (2016) stated that the biggest difficulty in finding intellectual substantiation for this turn to the East was a political one. The prevailing opinion among the Russian elites and intellectuals was that all the good things had come to Russia from the West. Russia's economic turn to the East was then boosted by dramatic confrontation with the West, which began in 2013—2014. The turn is no longer just a beneficial shift in the economic policy, but also assumes geopolitical and civilizational features for Russia. Korolev (2016) argued that at global level, Russia's turn to Asia is a part of its longer campaign of balancing against American unipolar domination.

Russia's pivot to Asia manifested firstly through its increasing military presence in the region. Russia's Pacific Fleet received additional upgrades in 2014 for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union and has made cruises through the Pacific and South China Sea.¹⁵ In the period from 2000 to 2021,

Russia was the largest arms exporter to Southeast Asia, with a total value of 10.87 billion USD. Russia's most important customers in the region during this period were Vietnam, which purchased 6.5 billion USD worth of arms, followed by Myanmar (1.7 billion USD), Malaysia (1.3 billion USD), and Indonesia (1.2 billion USD).¹⁶

Secondly, Russia increased its economic activities with Asian countries. Bilateral trade between Russia and Vietnam increased from 360 million USD in 2000 to 5.5 billion USD in 2021. The respective bilateral trade value with Malaysia are from 266 million USD to 2.1 billion USD, with Indonesia are from 169 million USD to 2.7 billion USD.¹⁷ The period from 2000 to 2014, there was moderate but steady growth in trade between Russia and ASEAN countries. After 2014, the trade and economic interaction between Russia and ASEAN sank noticeably due to limited sanctions imposed on Russia. Trade turnover between Russia and ASEAN reached its peak at 22.5 billion USD in 2014, then fell to 13.9 billion USD in 2015, and recovered to 19.2 billion USD in 2021.¹⁸ It's worth mentioning that Southeast Asia is also a region that Russia hopes to form deeper economic ties, especially after February 2022, as the contours of the sanction's restrictions of the collective West on Russia have taken shape.

However, Russia's economic role in the region is small, especially compared to the U.S. and the PRC. Even in bilateral trade relationship

<https://thediplomat.com/2013/07/russia-announces-a-naval-buildup-in-the-pacific/> (accessed: 29.04.2023).

¹⁶ Strangio S. Are Russian Arms Exports to Southeast Asia a Thing of the Past? // *The Diplomat*. May 9, 2022. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/are-russian-arms-exports-to-southeast-asia-a-thing-of-the-past/> (accessed: 29.04.2023).

¹⁷ UN Comtrade Database // United Nations. URL: <https://comtradeplus.un.org/> (accessed: 30.04.2023).

¹⁸ Koldunova E. Russia — ASEAN: Limits and Opportunities of Economic Partnership // *Valdai Discussion Club*. August 28, 2022. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-asean-limits-and-opportunities/> (accessed: 30.04.2023).

¹⁴ Kapoor N. Russia's Pivot to Asia — A 10-Year Policy Review // *Valdai Club Foundation*. March 21, 2022. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-s-pivot-to-asia-a-decadal-policy-review/> (accessed: 29.04.2023).

¹⁵ Keck Z. Russia Announces a Naval Buildup in the Pacific // *The Diplomat*. July 22, 2013. URL:

with China, Russia is playing a disproportionately imbalanced role. While China is Russia's largest trading partner, accounting for 15.5% of Russia's total trade in 2018, Russia only contributes about 0.8% of China's total trade value (Hillman, 2020, p. 2). Due to this economic position, Russia takes a much different approach compared to the U.S. While the US pivot to Asia is to contain China's rise, Russia is pivoting to Asia in line with China's rise. Gabuev and Zuenko (2018, p. 147) mentioned a shared view among Russian political elite and expert community, that the recent rise by China is simply a return to the country's natural position as a regional power in Asia. As such, Russia's strategy promotes a multipolar world order, in which Russia and China are equivalent regional power.

In relation to Russia's participation in the BRI, Moscow implements a pragmatic approach in bilateral interaction with China, with the goal to maintain the image of a "balancer" in the Asian region. Historically, Russia hardly had any colonial track record in the Asia-Pacific, so the pivot to the region for Russia is arguably easier than for China, as well as for most Western countries. However, if Russia ends up being closer to China, becoming more interdependent on Chinese economy, then Asian countries could perceive it as an economic pariah that is too close to China.¹⁹

The special military operation in Ukraine that began in 2022, and the subsequent sharp deterioration of relations with Western countries have once again actualized the need to reorient towards Asian countries. However, according to the researchers, in order to realize this plan, Russia needs to avoid the mistakes made eight years ago.²⁰ These include the lack of consistent

actions, far-reaching plans without any strategic roadmap, or hardly even a guiding principles document. This time, many Asian countries have adopted a wait-and-see position to the Ukrainian crisis, which is also their attitude towards Russia's pivot to the region.

Vietnam is one of Asian countries who maintained neutrality or kept "strategic silence" towards the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. For Vietnam specifically, this conflict also provides some important lessons on great powers' competition. Despite being condemned by the international community, suffering heavy economic losses after becoming the most sanctioned country in the world, Russia is still conducting its special military operation in Ukraine.²¹ This shows that in the current context, great powers often put their own national interests above everything else. When these interests are threatened, these countries are ready to go to extreme length to protect them, even if it means sacrificing the interests of other countries, including allies.

Vietnam's Strategy to Mitigate the Risk Associated with Great Power Competition

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) recognizes the rising importance of the Asia-Pacific region in the world.²² This region will continue to be an important driving force of the global economy but is also affected by potential

<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/asia-pacific/taking-another-turn-to-the-east-making-sense-of-russia-s-stance-in-the-asia-pacific/> (accessed: 10.04.2023).

²¹ Wadhams N. Russia Is Now the World's Most-Sanctioned Nation // Bloomberg. March 7, 2022. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-07/russia-surges-past-iran-to-become-world-s-most-sanctioned-nation> (accessed: 07.08.2022).

²² Documents of the 13th National Congress of Deputies. Communist Party of Vietnam // Communist Party of Vietnam. March 7, 2022. P. 208—209. URL: <https://file1.dangcongsan.vn/data/0/documents/2022/01/28/phongnh/van-kien-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-lan-thu-xiii-tieng-anh.pdf> (accessed: 07.08.2022).

¹⁹ Kapoor N. Russia's Pivot to Asia — A 10-Year Policy Review // Valdai Club Foundation. March 21, 2022. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-s-pivot-to-asia-a-decadal-policy-review/> (accessed: 29.04.2023).

²⁰ Toropchin G. Taking (Another) Turn to the East: Making Sense of Russia's Stance in the Asia-Pacific // Russian International Affairs Council. June 2, 2022. URL:

destabilizing factors due to strategic competition of great powers and territorial disputes for resources. The U.S. — China trade war, the EU's confusion due to Brexit are manifestations of the weakening of the old economic powers in the face of an increasingly strength of emerging economies. While the U.S. is taking a step back from its free and open trade policy, China seems to be leading economic globalization with its BRI strategy and promoting RCEP Agreement. The new world is taking shape with the growing role of emerging economies, with prospect of new international economic rules, the formation of new financial centers and new markets on a global scale.²³

Vietnamese researchers view the strategic purpose of the US pivot to Asia is to exercise its dominance through economic, political, military and diplomatic activities. Russia's pivot to the region is viewed as a three-fold strategy: politically, to consolidate and develop relations with major forces in the Asia-Pacific; economically, to actively promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation through trade agreements; in terms of security, to increase Russia's presence and influence in building the regional security mechanism. As for China, Vietnamese intellectuals identify the major goals of the BRI strategy as: (i) expanding strategic space and creating China's "sphere of influence" in the Eurasian continent; (ii) counterbalance the US "rebalancing" to Asia; (iii) dominating the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, as well as surrounding shipping lanes and regional seaport systems (Pham & Vu, 2020).

²³ Nguyễn Quang Thuán Một số vấn đề kinh tế thế giới, khu vực hiện nay và xu hướng trong thời gian tới // Hội đồng Lý luận Trung ương Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam [Nguyen Quang Thuan Some Regional and Global Economic Issues and Future Trends in Current Context // Central Theoretical Council of the Communist Party of Vietnam]. December 5, 2019. (In Vietnamese). URL: <https://hdl.vn/vi/nghien-cuu---trao-doi/mot-so-van-de-kinh-te-the-gioi-khu-vuc-hien-nay-va-xu-huong-trong-thoi-gian-toi.html> (accessed: 12.04.2023).

In such uncertain context, Vietnam has to implement a flexible strategy that balances great powers' interests without compromising its own national interest. This paper proposes three key characteristics of such strategy, in line with the vision set out in Documents of the Vietnam's 13th National Congress of Deputies.²⁴

First, Vietnam should aim to take advantage of the opportunities to expand its economic integration, thereby enhancing national strength in global economy. In the current context, most countries in the world give priority to economic tools over political tools to achieve their strategic goals. This creates many opportunities to access economic and human resources. One way through which Vietnam can make the most out of these opportunities is actively participating in new generation free trade agreements, such as FTA with EU (EVFTA), FTA with Korea (VKFTA) or CPTPP.²⁵ Integrating deeper into global economy will make Vietnam more interconnected with other economies in the world. This puts Vietnam's economic interests in line with its partners' interests, reducing the risks of political tension among the countries.

Second, Vietnam should expand the scope and forms of its diplomatic activities. With recent advancement of the fourth industrial revolution, communication technology is becoming more important than ever in promoting the country's image. Major countries in the world use radio, television, movie or music industry to promote their national identity and culture to other part of the globe. One form of diplomacy that Vietnam should utilize more

²⁴ Documents of the 13th National Congress of Deputies. Communist Party of Vietnam // Communist Party of Vietnam. March 7, 2022. P. 208—209. URL: <https://file1.dangcongsan.vn/data/0/documents/2022/01/28/phongnh/van-kien-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-lan-thu-xiii-tieng-anh.pdf> (accessed: 07.08.2022).

²⁵ The Impact of New Free Trade Agreements on the Vietnam Economy // Asia Business Consulting. June 5, 2019. URL: <https://www.asiabizconsult.com/images/pdf/The-impact-of-new-generation-Free-Trade-Agreements-on-the-Vietnam-economy.pdf> (accessed: 08.08.2022).

is through the media, especially digital television, satellite television and the internet. Media's scope of coverage is very large and is now widely used in political activities in many countries. If there is one lesson about the role of information from recent Russia — Ukraine conflict, it is that the same action can be praised or condemned based on how a country is perceived by the global community. The Western media often portrays Ukrainian refugees "with blond hair and blue eyes" as being "civilized," while those fleeing from places like Syria or Afghanistan were not (Morgunova & Moraru, 2022, p. 745). In turn, the call for people to go fight in Ukraine is deemed as heroic act, while the same call to flight in Yemen or in Syria would likely be labeled as terrorism.²⁶ Therefore, Vietnam needs to provide timely, accurate and accessible information to global community to strengthen the image of an open and peaceful country, preventing hostile forces from spreading false information about Vietnam.

Third, Vietnam should move to play a more proactive role in global community. In addition, Vietnam as a member of ASEAN can play a core role in deepening Asia-Pacific integration. Due to past disagreements and mistrust, it is difficult for the major economies in the region, such as China, South Korea or Japan to be accepted as the initiator of regional integration (Yahuda, 2019). While it is difficult for any individual ASEAN country to assume this position, ASEAN as a whole, being the fifth largest economy and the third largest populated region in the world,²⁷ certainly qualifies.

²⁶ Rozzelle J. Whose Suffering Counts? A Discussion Looking at Crisis Coverage Beyond Ukraine // The New Humanitarian. April 8, 2022. URL: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/04/08/event-crisis-coverage-beyond-Ukraine> (accessed: 08.08.2022).

²⁷ Investing in ASEAN // ASEAN. 2023. URL: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/investment-report-2023.pdf> (accessed: 08.08.2022).

Conclusion

Overall, the current global political context is highly volatile and uncertain. In response to projection of the 21st century as an Asian century, great powers in the world are shifting their focus to the Indo-Pacific region. The US pivot to the region is set to challenge the rise of China and to maintain the US position as the leader of the world. China's expanding influence is to reclaim its historical position in the region. Russia's pivot to Asia is implemented in line with China's rise, and two countries maintain a strategic partnership level of relationship with each other. Such activity of the three great powers creates conditions, where smaller countries in the region may face the risk of being drawn into a struggle for influence between them.

To avoid this risk, Vietnam should maintain its independent, self-reliant, and neutral foreign policy. On the one hand, it should promote international integration and become more interconnected with other economies in the world. On the other hand, Vietnam needs to pay attention to build an independent economy so that it does not rely too much on any particular country. Vietnam should diversify many forms of diplomacy, especially through the form of media and the internet. At the same time, Vietnam should avoid participating in military alliances given the current highly volatile global context. In this context, great powers often put their own national interests first and are willing to sacrifice the interests of other countries, even allies. Therefore, Vietnam needs to continue implementing a smart and flexible foreign policy, to take advantage of the opportunities from great powers, but also assuring the international investors about a safe and stable economic environment.

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About the author: *Nguyen Son Thanh* — Research Fellow, Institute of Political Economy, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics; Faculty Member, FPT University; ORCID: 0000-0002-3665-3113; e-mail: nguyenthanson.ktct@hcma.edu.vn