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Ly Tuong Van, Hoang Anh Tuan

Between Two Powers: Vietnam and the Strategic Balancing of Russia and China in the 21st Century¹

Abstract. In the context of intensifying competition for influence among major powers, especially between Russia and China, Vietnam has emerged as a key geopolitical actor in the Asia Pacific region in the early 21st century, gaining strategic importance in both countries' policies. This study explores whether Vietnam, building on its Cold War experience, can continue to effectively balance relations with Russia and China. Employing a historical—political approach combined with international relations analysis grounded in realism and the balance of power theory, the paper examines Vietnam's foreign policy adjustments in response to both cooperative and competitive dynamics in Russia — China relations.

Keywords: Vietnam, strategic balancing, geopolitics, Vietnam, Russia, China relations.

Authors: Ly Tuong Van, Ph.D. (History), Vice Dean of Faculty of History, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

ORCID: 0009-0009-6366-4924. E-mail: tuongvannly@ussh.edu.vn

Hoang Anh Tuan, Ph.D. (History), Professor, Rector of University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

ORCID: 0009-0002-4824-0671. E-mail: tuan@ussh.edu.vn

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Ли Тьонг Ван, Хоанг Ань Туан

Между двумя державами: Вьетнам и стратегическое балансирование в отношениях с Россией и Китаем в 21 веке¹

Аннотация. В контексте усиливающейся конкуренции за влияние между крупными державами, особенно между Россией и Китаем, Вьетнам стал ключевым геополитическим игроком в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе в начале 21 в., приобретя стратегическое значение в политике обеих стран. В статье анализируется, может ли Вьетнам, опираясь на свой опыт холодной войны, продолжать эффективно балансировать в отношениях с Россией и Китаем. Используя историко-политический подход в сочетании с анализом международных отношений, основанным на реализме и теории баланса сил, авторы рассматривают корректировку внешней политики Вьетнама в зависимости от динамики сотрудничества и конкуренции в отношениях между Россией и Китаем.

Ключевые слова: Вьетнам, стратегическое балансирование, геополитика, отношения между Вьетнамом, Россией и Китаем.

Авторы: Ли Тьонг Ван, к. и. н., зам. декана исторического факультета, Университет общественных и гуманитарных наук Ханойского государственного университета. ORCID: 0009-0009-6366-4924. E-mail: tuongvannly@ussh.edu.vn
Хоанг Ань Туан, к. и. н., профессор, ректор, Университет общественных и гуманитарных наук Ханойского государственного университета. ORCID: 0009-0002-4824-0671. E-mail: tuan@ussh.edu.vn

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Introduction

Amid global geostrategic shifts and rising power rivalries, the boundaries and equilibrium in relations with great powers remain exceedingly fragile. Opportunities are often fleeting, while challenges serve as critical tests of a nation's capacity to maintain strategic balance. Vietnam faces a strategic — though not new, it has grown increasingly complex — namely, how to sustain balance between Russia and China in a volatile world. This research is urgent not only due to shifts in Russia — China ties but also because of the U.S., a key actor shaping the Vietnam — China — Russia triangle. While U.S. — China competition dominates global dynamics, Russia — China rivalry also influences its trajectory.

This study draws on official Vietnamese foreign policy documents, academic sources, and strategic analyses from international institutes. The growing use of “major power balancing” in both state and scholarly discourse reflects a shift in Vietnam’s foreign policy — from a rigid “friend—enemy” logic to a mindset emphasizing the “creation of intertwined strategic interests between Vietnam and powers” [Hội nghị

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Trung ương Đảng: 10.06.2014; Nguyen Phu Trong 2024; Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam 2011; Pham Quang Minh 2018]. The Russia — China partnership has grown significantly in the 21st century, even declaring a “no limits” partnership. However, scholars agree a true alliance against the West is unlikely, as both remain cautious despite valuing each other to balance the U.S. and the West [Nye 2015; Baev 2019; Ngo Dai Huy 2018; Fu Ying 2015]. In the context of Russia — China rivalry in the Asia Pacific Region (APR), Vietnam holds a special position due to its pivotal geopolitical location in the region. It has become a “most important” and “indispensable” strategic partner in the policies of both nations [Luzyanin 2022; Nguyen Ba Hai, Kazushige Kobayashi 2024]. During the Cold War, Hanoi flexibly employed a balancing strategy in response to the Sino — Soviet rivalry, enabling Vietnam to both optimize its national interests while maintaining its strategic independence [Ly Tuong Van 2024; Pham Quang Minh 2014]. At the present time, as an emerging middle power, Vietnam must adopt a cautious approach to balancing policy to both expand its strategic development space and maximally safeguard national interests, while also maintaining a high degree of flexibility in adjusting this policy in response to Russia — China relationship [Pham Quoc Thanh 2022; Kozyrev 2014; Nguyen Ba Hai, Kazushige Kobayashi 2024]. Ultimately, the paper argues that despite numerous difficulties and challenges, a foreign policy characterized by flexibility, diversification, and multilateralization — and anchored in principles of independence, self-reliance, for national interests, and the legitimate interests of international partners — constitutes the key for Vietnam to sustain strategic balance between Russia and China amid the current era of geopolitical rivalry.

Great power competition in the early 21st century and Vietnam’s balancing strategy

Entering the 21st century, especially since the global economic financial crisis of 2008—2009, the world has witnessed the third global power shift. This shift has taken place in two directions: from West to East and from North to South. The West—to—East shift indicates a transition of the economic political center from the Atlantic region to the Pacific region, highlighting the relative decline of the U.S. and the strong rise of China. In this context, all major powers have adjusted their strategies to compete for influence: the U.S., with the overarching objective of maintaining its sole superpower status amidst global uncertainties, aims to contain and restrain rivals challenging its “number one” position; China has risen assertively, expanding its strategic space toward the seas to increase its influence in Southeast Asia region (SEAR), East Asia region (EAR), and to compete with the U.S. in the APR. China has strongly implemented the Belt and Road Initiative, promoted BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) towards building a China-centric cooperation mechanism, asserting its position as both a regional and global power. The U.S. — China rivalry is taking place in many parts of the world, but it is most intense in the APR. While Russia’s relations with the U.S. and Western countries have reached their lowest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s relationship with the APR has prospered through its efforts to

“Pivot to Asia”/“Looking to the East”. Despite facing economic difficulties due to the Ukraine crisis, Russia remains a power that compels the U.S. and the West to consider its role in resolving global issues. Other major powers such as Japan and India strive to become the third-largest economic powers globally. Both countries are focusing on managing competing interests with China, particularly in maritime security and the order of seas and islands. ASEAN continues to ensure strategic autonomy in its relations with major powers. Due to a lack of mutual trust, major powers support ASEAN’s central role in fostering and promoting regional cooperation through forums such as ARF, ADMM+, Shangri-La Dialogue, East Asian Cooperation, making ASEAN an important factor in regional order in EAR and APR.

Thus, amid the shift of power from West to East, the APR stands at the intersection of the core political, security, and strategic interests of major powers. More importantly, this region serves as the arena where major powers expand their influence in pursuit of global powers status. Competition over power, interests, and strategic positions among major powers — especially the United States, China, and Russia — is intensifying, generating multidimensional impacts on international life, both positive and negative, while creating opportunities and challenges for medium and small states (see also [Le Hai Binh 2021]).

The essence of the power shift from North to South is the emergence of developing and newly industrialized countries or Middle Powers,¹ through organizations such as BRICS, CIVETS,² or N—11³. Middle powers are considered powerful actors in international political life. They have the capacity to reshape the global balance of power and profoundly influence the international order [Đới Duy Lai 2025]. As observed, Vietnam is present in both CIVETS and N—11, and is poised to become a member of BRICS. This also means that Vietnam is increasingly emerging as a middle power in the region and is recognized by the international community [Lê Hồng Hiệp 2018]. According to the Asia-Pacific power index in 2024, Vietnam ranked 12th out of 27, up 1.2 points from 2023. Among the eight measured indicators, Vietnam performed best in diplomatic influence, a result of proactive diplomatic engagement with diverse partners [Lowy Institute 2024]. Although the term “middle power” has not yet been officially used in political discourse, in practice, Vietnamese politicians and scholars have implicitly positioned Vietnam as an emerging middle power [Ibid.].

On the other hand, by holding the position of a “pivot state” in SEAR and APR, Vietnam gains “strategic value” for major powers but is also prone to becoming “sensitive” in its interactions with involved parties. In its foreign policy with major powers, Vietnam applies a “soft balancing” strategy; it promotes the identity of

¹ The recognition of a middle power is based on its capabilities and national power (both “hard power” and “soft power”); a geostrategic position that confers influence; international prestige and influence (reflected in its priority status in the foreign policies of other states, especially major powers); and the possession of a distinct international identity as a middle power [Emmers, Teo 2014: 185—216].

² The CIVETS group, known as a group of promising emerging economies, includes Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, and South Africa.

³ N-11 includes Vietnam, Mexico, Nigeria, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh, Indonesia, South Korea, and the Philippines. The term “N-11” was first mentioned in the article *N-11: The World’s New Wave*, published in the April 2011 issue of Canada’s Financial Post magazine.

“bamboo diplomacy,” emphasizing flexibility and high adaptability in maximizing national interests and ensuring national defense and security, while also maximizing its ability to maintain independence, autonomy, and expand strategic space [Toàn văn Nghị quyết...: 26.02.2021]. Vietnam consistently adheres to the principle of “non—alignment,” avoiding becoming a “sacrificial pawn” in the strategic rivalry of major powers in the APR. On that basis, Vietnam clearly defines the orientation of maintaining strategic balance with major powers: “It is necessary to create interwoven strategic interests between Vietnam and major powers, strategic partners, neighboring countries, and regional countries through strengthening cooperation, avoiding conflicts, confrontations, isolation, or dependence.” [Hội nghị Trung ương Đảng: 10.06.2014]. Deepening and intensifying bilateral cooperation with each major power is key to creating interwoven interests and increasing the level of trust major powers place in Vietnam.

Pursuing a foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, multilateralization, and diversification — being a friend, a reliable partner, and a responsible member of the international community — Vietnam has adopted a “Four No’s” Defense Policy: No military alliances; No foreign military bases or use of Vietnamese territory to oppose other countries; No siding with one country against another; No use or threat of force in international relations. This policy reaffirms Vietnam’s neutral posture while fostering trust among members of the international community. Moreover, to ensure the effectiveness of its balancing strategy, Vietnam’s 2019 National Defense White Paper explicitly states: “Depending on developments in the situation and under specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary defense and military relations to an appropriate extent, based on mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity, as well as fundamental principles of international law and mutually beneficial cooperation for the common interests of the region and international community” [Ministry of National Defense 2019: 25]. This affords Vietnam the flexibility and proactiveness to respond effectively in complex situations or in urgent circumstances requiring the defense of the homeland. In practice, Vietnam has demonstrated considerable diplomatic acumen in engaging with multiple major powers capable of providing meaningful strategic counterbalances — including in traditionally sensitive domains such as defense cooperation. This reflects a pragmatic yet nuanced approach to foreign policy that allows Vietnam to safeguard its national interests while maintaining equilibrium in an increasingly complex international environment (See also [Phan Xuan Dung 2022: 159—1159]).

Vietnam’s position in the strategic competition between Russia and China in the Asia Pacific Region

Throughout history, Russia has primarily shaped its diplomatic identity within the Euro-Atlantic space. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, this traditional diplomatic mindset has undergone a transformation. In his 2016 Federal Assembly Address, President Vladimir Putin emphasized that Russia’s “Turn to the East” policy is not merely a short-term response to the crisis in relations with the U.S. and the EU, but

rather reflects long-term national interests and global development trends.¹ Russia seeks to achieve diplomatic breakthroughs in the Asia-Pacific with the strategic objectives of containing the United States, balancing China, and deterring Japan [Hill, Lo 2013; Phạm Đức Tâm 2022]. Furthermore, Russia places great emphasis on developing relations with India and ASEAN (especially Vietnam and Indonesia), viewing them as critical steps in deploying its strategy in the APR. If Russia can maintain its position in the Indian Ocean, along with the Russian Far East, it will create a “dual—wing” effect, embracing the entire EAR, thereby significantly increasing Russia's involvement in the APR and gradually implementing its global strategy.

Historically, the Soviet — China alliance was established in the 1950s but was short-lived as it was grounded in opportunistic calculations [Lý Tường Văn 2024: 66—76]. The two countries were soon divided by their rivalry for leadership within the socialist bloc and deep mutual distrust, which persisted until the collapse of the Soviet Union. By the early 21st century, particularly since 2014, the Russia — China relationship has been widely viewed as highly pragmatic, driven more by short-term interests than by long-term strategic trust. While the two cooperate when mutual interests align, they are equally prepared to compete when those interests are threatened [Thi Thi 2022]. As a result, the relationship lacks long-term sustainability.

In his article “What Do Russians Think About China’s Rise?”, Dr. Ngo Dai Huy analyzes that, on one hand, Russia regards China as a key partner in counterbalancing Western influence, particularly that of the U.S. From Russia’s perspective, China’s rise represents a potential “strategic pillar,” as China is considered the most crucial actor for Moscow to leverage against US and Western dominance. On the other hand, Russians believe that China also needs cooperation with Russia to counter the U.S., given that American pressure on Beijing is perceived to be greater than that on Moscow. In this regard, China’s growing power is seen as a factor that could help Russia maintain its global status and resist Western hegemony. This explains why Russia has actively pursued economic and military cooperation with China. In other words, the Russia—China partnership is strategic in nature, as it is rooted in the long-term interests of both sides in confronting U.S. power. However, after China’s rise, it could become a potential threat to Russia’s national security due to China’s “territorial ambitions”, particularly in Russia’s Far East, as well as its overwhelming economic strength compared to Russia. Additionally, Russia and China have conflicting interests in Central Asia (Russia’s traditional backyard) and in competing for influence in SEAR and the Indian Ocean, most directly in Vietnam and India. Overall, Russia’s stance on China’s rise is characterized by a blend of trust and apprehension, cooperating for mutual benefit while maintaining a cautious posture to protect its own interests. Furthermore, differences in strategic visions, geopolitical interests, and historical rivalry

¹ The image of the double-headed eagle, facing both East and West, has long been associated with Russia's national emblem, and symbolizes the country's vast territory, two-thirds of which lies in Asia. In the Decree approving the new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation dated March 31, 2023, Russia affirms its “special status as a distinctive civilization, a Great Eurasian power and Greater Euro-Pacific power.” (See [Nilov 2023] and [The Concept of the Foreign Policy 2023]).

make this relationship susceptible to fluctuations in international dynamics [Ngô Đại Huy 2018].

Unlike the first two terms of Vladimir Putin, which focused on relations with countries in the NEAR and South Asia, during President Medvedev's term (2008–2012), Russia's new foreign policy particularly emphasized the SEAR direction. Vietnam was prioritized in Medvedev's SEAR policy because strengthening relations with Vietnam helped Russia consolidate its position in SEAR, while also reducing its dependency on China [Medvedev 2008]. The US factor also influenced Russia's decision to prioritize Vietnam, as the U.S. was also seeking to establish a closer relationship with Vietnam to balance China's rise. Russia, the US, and China are all competing for influence in the APR in general and SEAR in particular. Therefore, “a positive relationship with Vietnam has made Russia emerge as a power between China and the U.S.” [Tsvetov 2014].

Given its critical geostrategic position in the SEAR and the APR, Vietnam — despite its modest size — is considered by Russia one of its top three strategic partners in the region, alongside China and India. Lying at the intersection of the East Asia Region, SEAR, and the Pacific, Vietnam connects North–South and East–West, serving as a bridge between NEAR and SEAR, acting as a land, sea, and air gateway between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It also sits at the heart of regional economic flows and links directly to the East China Sea and Russia's Far East. In today's shifting balance of power, Vietnam's geostrategic relevance and international influence have grown steadily. Its active role in ASEAN, the UN, APEC, G20, BRICS, and other forums reflects its increasing agency in global affairs. Any great power — Russia and China included — seeking to shape a favorable regional order in SEAR or APR must inevitably factor in Vietnam.¹ [Lý Tường Vân 2024a: 393].

From a multilateral perspective, Russia's engagement in SEAR and the APR through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) affirms its Euro-Pacific identity. Beyond strengthening intra-bloc ties, the EAEU seeks broader linkages with multilateral bodies like the SCO and BRICS to shape a Greater Eurasian space. The 75-year tradition of Soviet/Russian–Vietnamese friendship facilitates Russia's expanding regional footprint. Policy shifts toward SEAR and Vietnam benefit both sides — enhancing Vietnam's global integration and prestige while contributing to regional stability, balancing China's rise, and reinforcing the APR's role in a multipolar world.

Vietnam's Russia — China balancing policy in the early 21st century

To date, Vietnam has been widely recognized for its successful navigation of strategic equilibrium amidst the U.S. — China rivalry in the APR. While fostering robust cooperation with the US across multiple domains, including defense, Vietnam has

¹ Hamada Kazuyuki, a Japanese economist and author of the book *The Future Superpowers: Redrawing the World Map in 2030*, has made many positive assessments of Vietnam. Starting with the observation that “Vietnam is currently the most remarkably developing economy in Asia,” the author argues that Vietnam possesses the ambition, vision, and capacity to transform itself into a future great power, capable of challenging the existing major powers. He also forecasts that by 2048, “Vietnam will rank among the world's top 20 economies in terms of size” [Kazuyuki 2020: 72–98; 270].

remained cautious not to jeopardize its stable relationship with China. This nuanced approach to balancing ties with two major powers has earned Vietnam notable respect among regional middle powers. Unlike the escalating U.S. — China rivalry, Russia — China competition in the APR appears “warmer”¹, marked by deepening economic, military, and diplomatic ties. This has prompted debates on whether their partnership could evolve into an alliance — an issue critical for Vietnam’s strategic balancing. Given their triangular dynamics with the U.S., any assessment of Russia — China ties must also account for Washington’s dual role in both drawing them closer and defining their limits.

The Russia — China relationship is rooted in pragmatism, not friendship, as both powers shift strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific to secure national interests. Their alignment — driven by the logic of “the enemy of my enemy” — reflects a tactical convergence rather than deep trust. Scholars like Fu Ying and Joseph S. Nye argue that despite growing economic, military, and diplomatic cooperation between the two countries, a formal alliance is unlikely [Fu Ying 2015; Nye 2015]. Fu Ying highlights diverging diplomatic traditions and persistent mutual suspicions, while Nye notes that although power-balancing theory supports such an alliance against U.S. dominance, stark asymmetries — particularly China’s superiority — deter Russia from dependence. P.K. Baev similarly describes the relationship as a “presidential pseudo-alliance” based on short-term, anti-Western interests rather than long-term strategic commitment. Without formal guarantees and amid unequal power dynamics, future instability remains a risk [Baev 2019: 5, 13].

The Russia — China alignment is unlikely to break unless the U.S. adopts a strategy of appeasing one side to counter the other. However, a formal alliance could still emerge if Washington continues confronting both simultaneously. While stable Russia — China ties don’t compel Vietnam to choose sides — since both are comprehensive strategic partners — they could complicate Vietnam’s South China Sea disputes if Russia aligns with China against the U.S. (despite being Vietnam’s main arms supplier). Historical precedent, such as the 1954 Geneva Conference, shows the risks of Sino—Soviet collusion at Vietnam’s expense [Lý Tường Vân 2024: 66—76]. Today, despite conflicting interests, Beijing and Moscow maintain a tacit understanding to respect each other’s strategic space [Kozyrev 2014: 10], making Cold War—style confrontation unlikely. Even if the worst-case scenario unfolds — resembling the Soviet-era context — the pursuit of a power-balancing logic through a defense alliance with the Soviet Union, as in 1978, should not be revived, even as a matter of strategic intent.² In other words, the

¹ Russia and China officially upgraded their relationship to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era” in 2019. Entering the third decade of the 21st century, President Vladimir Putin remarked that the two countries’ comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation had reached “the highest level in history.”

² The late 1970s marked a period of rapprochement between China, the United States, and the West. The balance of power shifted as China and the U.S. cooperated to counter the Soviet influence, including in relation to Vietnam. The situation created by China at that time (the Khmer Rouge issue in Cambodia in 1978, the border invasion of North Vietnam in 1979, and the efforts to rally ASEAN countries to encircle and isolate Vietnam throughout the 1980s) forced Vietnam to “choose sides” by establishing an alliance with the Soviet Union.

potential revival of the Hanoi—Moscow alliance in the future depends on China's behavior in the region. Vietnam's key historical lesson lies in its flexible balancing strategy during the Sino—Soviet split (1960s—early 1970s), which enabled Hanoi to secure support from both powers against the U.S. while maintaining strategic independence [Phạm Quang Minh 2014: 147—175].

Unlike during the Cold War, when Vietnam relied on a single security guarantor, Vietnam now pursues a multilateral strategy amid China's growing assertiveness, especially in the South China Sea. It prioritizes comprehensive strategic partnerships with the U.S., Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and Russia. Russia is a unique case, given its close ties with Beijing and upgraded relationship with China,¹ while the remaining partners are part of U.S.-led groupings that serve as counterweights to China. This approach helps Vietnam maintain strategic autonomy, deepen ties with U.S. allies, and balance China's influence, while avoiding conflict in its economic and broader relations with Beijing.

Conclusion

In a shifting global order marked by great power rivalry, Vietnam faces fragile and dynamic relations with major powers, especially Russia and China. Success depends on managing these complex dynamics to secure strategic position and national interests of Vietnam.

Vietnam's balancing strategy is both prudent and effective. By steadfastly upholding strategic autonomy, Vietnam has adeptly navigated the complex interplay of convergence and divergence among major powers. Through flexible and creative adjustments to its foreign policy, informed by close monitoring of global dynamics, Vietnam has avoided strategic passivity and safeguarded itself from overreliance on any single actor — whether Russia, China, or the United States.

Crucially, the feasibility of Vietnam's balancing approach hinges on the persistence of divergent strategic interests between Russia and China. While not overtly confrontational, Moscow and Beijing pursue distinct agendas in the Asia-Pacific and Southeast Asia. China seeks regional primacy through economic and military expansion — particularly via the Belt and Road Initiative and assertive actions in the East Sea and Southeast Asia. In contrast, Russia seeks to assert itself as an independent Eurasian power. It resists subordination to Beijing, maintains neutrality in maritime disputes, and engages the region primarily through defense and energy cooperation. These strategic divergences are especially salient in Vietnam's case. Russia is a close and long-standing strategic partner, notably in energy cooperation in the South China Sea, where its projects often face pressure from China. While Beijing asserts maritime claims and applies economic leverage, Moscow supports peaceful dispute resolution in line with international law. Such asymmetries in behavior and interests between the two

¹ However, Russia simultaneously serves as a provider of military and economic cooperation to potential adversaries of China, such as Vietnam, India, South Korea, and Japan, thereby creating counterbalances to China in the Asia-Pacific region.

powers provide Vietnam with critical strategic space to sustain a flexible, autonomous, and multidirectional foreign policy.

By promoting a multipolar world grounded in international rules and norms and diversifying partnerships beyond Russia and China — including the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, and through institutions like UN, ASEAN, EAS, ARF and APEC — Vietnam expands its strategic space and safeguards sovereignty.

To maximize national benefits from balancing between Russia and China, the most crucial factor is Vietnam's internal strength, combining hard and soft power, underpins its ability to balance externally. The “bamboo diplomacy” approach remains central to adapting within the complex 21st-century Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

Ultimately, Vietnam's flexible, diversified, and multilateral foreign policy — based on the principles of independence, autonomy, and cooperation and the pursuit of national interests and legitimate partner interests in international relations — enables it to maintain strategic equilibrium with Russia and China amid ongoing geopolitical competition.

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