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VIETNAM AS AN EMERGING MIDDLE POWER TOWARDS 2030 AND BEYOND

Abstract. Some recent studies suggest the idea that Vietnam is a potential candidate for the middle power status. The notion is based on the fact that the country has travelled a long way from isolation to regional integration to being an active, responsible member of the international community. The possibility for Vietnam to become a middle power has increasingly proven a topic of interest for scholars and policy-makers. This article is an attempt to elucidate three key aspects of that possibility, namely Vietnam's capacity, international behaviour and identity. Using a theoretical framework and set of empirical evidences that are structured around those three aspects, this article hypothesizes that Vietnam will meet the basic criteria of a middle power in the next decade and thus should adjust its foreign policy accordingly.

Keywords: Vietnam's foreign policy, international integration, middle power.

Introduction

Literature on middle powers abounds yet not much has been directed to the case of Vietnam at the time when the notable growth of the country in the last decades has required a reassessment of its ability and behaviour. In fact, the topic of a middle power is under-studied in international relations [Fels 2017: 207]. One could find the definitions of the middle power in *Britannica* [Mel Bac: 5.02.2019] or *Oxford Bibliographies* [Yilmaz: 27.09.2011], or especially in the oft-cited piece by Edward Joordan "The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers" [Joordan 2003]. Prior to those works, there was another attempt by Holbraad in his book "Middle Powers in International Politics" [Holbraad: 1984]. Few efforts, however, have been geared toward the case of Vietnam which have been mentioned either in a non-scholarly context such as the media or speeches by leaders or in scholarly volumes that focus on other cases. For example, in a recent article in the *Bangkok Post* Vietnam was called a "middle power" [Chongkittavorn: 6.11.2019]. Other more detailed research works include "Responding to Indo-Pacific Rivalry: Australia, India and Middle Power Coalitions" [Rory Medcalf and Raja Mohan 2014], "Middle Power National Identity: South Korea and Vietnam in US-China

Geopolitics” [Easley 2012], and “Regional Security Strategies of Middle Powers in the Asia-Pacific” [Emmers and Teo 2014]. The economic and diplomatic rise of Vietnam, thus, should trigger a more thorough examination.

In both theory and practice, an intriguing issue raised is whether Vietnam will be able to become a middle power by 2030? Should Vietnam then realign its diplomatic posture? In response to these questions, this article focuses on two main parts: *first*, providing relevant empirical evidences and, *second*, examining the case of Vietnam.

The criteria for middle powers usually include both domestic and international factors, indicating a certain (fairly high) level of economic development and organization of the state and society and diplomatic status. Regarding the level of influence, middle powers cannot be compared with superpowers but would outdo the rest. In short, the general criteria for assessing whether a country is a middle power are the hierarchical order of power or its capability, diplomatic behaviour, or the level of influence, and identity in the international system.

Empirical evidences

To demonstrate the viability of the middle powers, researchers often point to G20. The establishment of G20 can be seen as the most “dramatic” example of the changing balance of power in the international system [Downie: 9.06.2017]. In G20, the middle powers can now produce significant impact such as agenda-setting and coalition-building, areas that are no longer dominated by superpowers alone.

Superpowers and major countries can set up international institutions and spearhead the cooperation process. But these institutions are unlikely to operate effectively in the long-term without active participation by middle powers. In building the regional security architecture, middle powers and ASEAN (in the capacity of a middle power, being currently ranked fifth and predicted fourth largest economy in the world by 2050) are important stakeholders. ASEAN has proven its relevance through the efforts to achieve a balance of interests among regional nations with the Association being at the centre of a wider web of relationships. It is unlikely that the initiatives like Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can go far without the support of other countries, especially middle powers and ASEAN.

As stated by scholar Chietigj Bajpae, Asia’s middle powers are now more independent and freer from the shackles of the Cold War era. Bajpae also suggested that Vietnam be among the “key drivers of strategic change” in Asia [Bajpae: 7.10.2016].

The middle powers usually build bridges between richer, stronger countries and poorer, weaker countries. Middle powers make public their positions on many regional and international issues, including on security hotspots such as the Korean peninsula and the East Sea. These countries will not accept solutions singlehandedly settled by major countries. This is also the reason why ASEAN members emphasize multilateral agreements and mechanisms, ensuring the open and rules-based order in which ASEAN plays a central role.

As discussed above, the most distinctive identity of middle powers is the appreciation for the values of peace, dialogue, and respect for international law, multilateral institutions and arrangements. Major countries, much to the chagrin of middle powers, practise unilateralism from time to time.

From another perspective, small countries are often more cautious than middle powers when it comes to joining multilateral agreements due to concern over national sovereignty and their limited ability to enforce agreements. Generally, middle powers give priority to multilateralism and institutions such as the United Nations and regional organizations.

On middle powers, the two following disclaimers are also popular [Shin Dong-min: 20.06.2019]:

First, the term “middle power” has no official and legal status. In diplomacy, the term “middle power” sounds more sensitive than the concept of “medium-sized” country. In an ideal world, all countries are equal under the international law. To classify nations by power is to point to their nitty-gritty, not official designation or ranking. To identify a country small, medium-sized or big is to help set appropriate goals and diplomatic behaviour. Either a sense of inferiority or chauvinism should be avoided.

Second, realities are always livelier than theories. For example, mainstream international relations theories fail to take into account the role of non-state actors in the international system on all the three criteria of capability, behaviour and identity. In fact, some can make more impact on the international system than on a country. For example, numerous corporations possess assets that are bigger than the GDP of most nations combined. Today, of the 100 wealthiest economic entities in the world, 69 are corporations and only 31 countries. If put together, the top 10 corporations have a collective wealth that is bigger than China’s GDP [Ten largest: 4.04.2019].

Issues and Recommendations for Vietnam’s Diplomacy beyond 2030

Why 2030?

Theoretically, planned thinking (e.g. Five-Year or Ten-Year Plan) helps set clear targets and agenda. Quantification and identification of milestones can help determine how much effort agencies and organizations should put to ensure success with a certain span of time. In fact, setting a target without a specific deadline is also a common practice.

In consultation with line agencies, the Ministry of Investment and Planning of Vietnam drafted the National Action Plan on the implementation of the 2030 agenda and sustainable development goals, which was later approved by the Prime Minister. Similarly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam drafted other important documents using the milestone of 2030 such as the Strategy for International Integration through 2020, Vision to 2030, the Directive of the Secretariat of the Central Committee on promoting and enhancing multilateral external relations to 2030.

The time range between now and 2030 is the medium term, not too distant and difficult to set reasonable goals.

Why can Vietnam be a middle power?

Using the analytical framework as mentioned above, the top three criteria to judge whether a country is a middle power are strengths — national capabilities, diplomatic behaviour — international influence, and national identity. The case of Vietnam could be examined as follows:

Strength — capability

By a Lowy Institute ranking, Vietnam stands at the 13th as an emerging middle power in the Asia power index in 2019 [Lowy Institute: 12.07.2019]. In economics, several organizations forecast that Vietnam may reach the top 20 of the world’s largest economies after 2030. According to the PwC, by 2030, Vietnam may be ranked at the 29th, overtaking the Netherlands, and by 2050, at the 20th, ahead of Canada and Italy.

Since 2012, Vietnam’s economy has entered a period of stability, recovery and growth. GDP growth rate increased from 5.25 % in 2012 to 7.08 % in 2018, which is among the fastest growing economies in Asia. Meanwhile, the consumer price index (CPI) has dropped from 18.13 % in 2011 to 6.81 % in 2012 and 2.6 % in 2017 (3.53 % on average). Coupled with the stability, the business environment in Vietnam has been improved significantly, climbing up 14 levels in the ranking

(from 82 to 68 out of 190 countries and territories); the level of competitiveness increased by 5 positions (from 60 to 55/137); the rating of the banking system in Vietnam has been upgraded, from “stable” to “positive” [Bài viết: 1.03.2018].

Free trade generated a turnover of nearly US\$425 billion for Vietnam in 2017, 4 times bigger than ten years ago when the country joined the WTO. Vietnam is now considered to be one of the most open and successful economies among the developing countries. Seizing the opportunities from foreign trade and investment linkages, especially from the new-generation FTAs, Vietnam decides to launch itself deeper into the global value chain [TPP 11: 3.07.2018]. With regard to the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and new forms of business such as digital economy and collaborative economy, despite many challenges, Vietnam also has displayed a lot of potentials. Having one of the fastest rates of internet growth in the world, Vietnam’s e-commerce market is galloping at 35 % per year or 2.5 times faster than Japan [Vietnam’s e-commerce: 22.06.2019].

Also, it is noteworthy that Vietnam has tried to escape the middle-income trap or not to get stuck in the transition by embarking on development model reform, taking advantages of the global economic pendulum being swung from west to east and north to south to make a paradigm shift.

Being the 15th most populous nation in the world, Vietnam aims to achieve a stable sub-replacement fertility to project a population of about 104 million by 2030. Vietnam is now at the later stage of its golden population (70 percent of the population is under 35 years of age [World Bank: 8.12.2019]). This period can be extended if appropriate population growth rates are attained. Population not only reflects the size of the market and human resources but also the precept “when the people are rich, the country would be strong” promoted by the government. The Boston Consulting Group predicts that the middle and affluent class (MAC) in Vietnam will double in size between 2014 and 2020 [AmCham: 22.06.2018]. If this trend continues, after 2030, a larger portion of the Vietnamese population may be listed as middle class.

Apart from the “hard power” elements such as economics, population and military (in the global top 25 strongest militaries), the innovation index is also an important measurement of national capabilities, especially in the context of the ongoing Industrial Revolution 4.0. The number of scientific researches of Vietnam published in ISI journals in the past 5—6 years increased by 20 %. Though starting from a low point, patents granted for Vietnam over the last 5 years have increased by 60 %. According to The Global Innovation Index 2018 by the World Intellectual Property Organization in collaboration with Cornell University (USA) and the Institute of Business INSEAD (France), Vietnam has advanced remarkably to place 45 out of 126 countries and economies (up by 14 positions compared to 2016) [Cornell University 2018]. Because of the potential in innovation, more and more foreign investors have recently chosen Vietnam as a technological start-up nation. In spite of challenges, start-up projects in Vietnam are cherished in the region and beyond.

Diplomatic behaviour — international influence

To set the target for Vietnam to become a middle power does not imply that Vietnam only emphasizes power/strength or hierarchical order in diplomatic behaviour. National capability comes with responsibility. In fact, Vietnam has joined forces to tackle common issues such as peacekeeping, environmental protection, anti-terrorism, and natural disasters control. Responsibility is also reflected in the roles and contributions by the country to regional and international organizations. Vietnam is now a proactive member in ASEAN and willing to assume positions in various agencies within the United Nations system. Vietnam may revise its cooperation programs under the CLV (Cambodia-Laos-Viet Nam) framework in a way that Vietnam would accept a larger responsibility. In the economic realm, with the successful implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, Vietnam will be able to gradually change its status from an aid recipient country to a donor country.

Vietnam is a particularly proactive player in multilateral diplomacy, a significant indicator of a middle power (table 1).

Table 1. Vietnam’s Multilateral Diplomacy¹

Member	United Nations, WTO, APEC, ASEM, ASEAN, Non-Aligned Movement, La Francophonie, a founding member of AIIB
Term membership	Non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (2008—2009); Board of Governors of the IAEA (multiple times); United Nations Human Rights Council 2014—2016 (multiple times); Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) 2016—2018, World Heritage Committee 2013—2017; UNESCO Executive Board 2015—2019; and non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council 2020—2021
Term chairmanship	Francophonie Conference (1997), Chairman of ASEAN 7 (1998), ASEM V (2004), APEC 14 (2006); ASEAN 15 (2010); WEF East Asia (2010); Vietnam — Africa International Forum (2010); Vietnam — Latin America Forum on Trade and Investment (2012); IPU 32 (2015); APEC (2017), ASEAN (2020)
Regional and sub-regional cooperation	GMS, LMI, LMC, MRC, AMECS, CLV
Trilateral cooperation	Vietnam — Middle East/Africa — a third partner; China — Vietnam — Philippines Seismic Surveys (2005)
New multilateral trade agreement	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), EU — Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). Joining 15 and negotiating 1 FTA; Being located at the focal point of the regional FTAs with a network of 58 partners, five of which are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and account for more than 80 % of global GDP
Security integration	Joining UN Peacekeeping from 2014; disarmament, anti-terrorism; willing to act as a mediator for the North Korea issue); Member of the ARF Regional Forum, Shangri La, ADMM+

Source: Author’s data

The maturity of multilateral diplomacy is seen through Vietnam’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007, taking on the role of a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2007—2008, Chairman of ASEAN in 2010, hosting APEC in 2006 and 2017, and the Greater Mekong Summit in 2018. Vietnam succeeded again in securing a non-permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council for the period 2020—2021. For the consecutive years of 2017—2018, Vietnam was invited to attend the Outreach Session of the G7 Summit.

Together with state diplomacy, Vietnam has also stepped up multi-layered and multi-faceted international interaction such as parliamentary exchanges (for example, via the ASEAN-Interparliamentary Assembly-AIPA), party-to-party external relations (left wing parties, ruling parties, the world workers movement), people-to-people ties (ASEAN People’s Forum, Peace and Progressive Movements), sister cities and local cooperation (The Asian Urban Research Association, smart cities network), inter-agency connection (climate change, cybersecurity organizations) and company-to-company (CEO summit, fair, exhibition).

This dynamism shows Vietnam’s strong commitment to multilateral, multi-layered and multi-dimensional cooperation in many areas with the aim of both serving the national interests and making contributions to the common dividends. Specifically, Vietnam has played the role of (i) a *facilitator* (for example, Cambodia’s admission to ASEAN, the United States, Russia to the East Asia Summit and the ADMM+, ASEAN leaders’ first-ever dialogue meeting with APEC leaders at Da-

¹ Only prominent examples are listed here, not all of Vietnam’s dynamic multilateral diplomacy engagements.

nang in 2017); (ii) a *coordinator* (coordinating country of ASEAN-China, ASEAN-US relations, various United Nations forums, regional and sub-regional forums); and (iii) an *initiator* (for example, many initiatives within the United Nations, APEC, ASEAN, sub-regional cooperation).

In multilateral diplomacy, Vietnam upholds prevalent governing principles such as respect for each other’s independence, sovereignty, equality, mutual benefit, openness, tolerance, and voluntariness.

Not only at multilateral levels, Vietnam has also created a rich network of bilateral relationships with many countries (table 2).

Table 2. Vietnam’s bilateral diplomacy as of November 2018

<i>Diplomatic relations</i> : 187 countries
<i>Economic, Trade, Investment relations</i> : about 230 countries and territories <i>Import and Export value</i> : 1986: approx. US\$789 million; By 2018: approx. US\$480 billion <i>Foreign Direct Investment</i> : 1986: almost equal to 0; 2018: approx. US\$36 billion; for 30 years, approx. \$336 billion (authorised capital)
<i>Comprehensive partnership</i> (11 partners): South Africa, Chile, Brazil, Venezuela, New Zealand, Argentina, Ukraine, United States, Denmark, Myanmar, and Brunei
<i>Strategic partnership</i> (17 partners): China, Russia, India, Japan, South Korea, Spain, United Kingdom, Germany, Italia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, France, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia, and the Netherlands
<i>Comprehensive strategic partnership</i> : China, Russia, India <i>Special relationship</i> : Laos, Cambodia, Cuba
Comprehensive partnership or strategic partnership with all five permanent members of the UN Security Council

Source: Author’s data

Given the increase in its capacity and building upon its traditional activism in diplomacy, it would be safe to argue that Vietnam will readjust its foreign policy to 2030 and beyond in a way that fits with the behavior of an emerging middle power.

Identity-branding of Vietnam

By implementing distinguishable internal and external policies, Vietnam has been known as a Southeast Asian country that values independence, freedom, self-reliance, peace, and justice. Vietnam always gives priority to relations with neighboring and regional countries and supports ASEAN’s central role in the evolving regional security architecture. All this undertaking is complemented by an open mindset that advocates for enhanced international integration, rules-based order, sustainable development, humane, equitable, democratic, and civilized society. Accordingly, Vietnam is not a miniature of China or patterned after anyone as depicted by a portion of the international media and scholarship.

With a balanced approach, over the years, Vietnam has gained increasing regional and international confidence in promoting multilateral and sub-regional cooperation. Endorsing universal values and dividends such as peace, stability and development, Vietnam has initially signalled that it can play the role of a mediator and take the lead in certain cooperative processes¹. Vietnam has stated its views on significant issues such as denuclearization, new-generation trade deals, and the regional and international rules-based order.

At the bilateral level, Vietnam has made efforts to address the sensitive relationship between its non-alignment policy and the goal of building true, long-lasting friendship and partnership. This

¹ For example, Vietnam hosted the second summit between United States President Donald Trump and Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Leader Kim Jong Un in February 2019.

shows a forward-looking but nuanced approach, which is in line with the characteristics of a middle power.

Vietnam has built a consistent image of a nation that respects the common rules and normative values. For example, with regard to the Mekong issue, as the lowest downstream country, Vietnam has adopted a steady position to ensure water security and development goals that are fair, rational and sustainable on the basis of good practices and laws such as the 1995 Mekong agreement and respecting other countries' legitimate interests in the basin. Regarding the East Sea issue, Vietnam would resolutely and persistently defend its sovereignty, sovereign rights and principles in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS. At the same time, the country is willing to cooperate with other parties in addressing common challenges, in respect of international law and for the larger interests of the region. Supporting an effective, binding, and substantial code of conduct (COC), Vietnam has made every effort to protect "common interests" such as the environment, fisheries, security, safety and freedom of navigation.

Perhaps the Vietnamese diplomatic branding is all about consistence. For decades, Vietnam has shown respect for universal values such as peace, dialogue, and equality. The country is, however, resolute when needed to fight for legitimate interests. The values adopted and actions taken by Vietnam are common if compared with other middle powers.

Recommendations

First of all, it is necessary to eradicate the two extreme ends of the thinking process in which one camp claims that Vietnam is too small and ill-suited to propose and lead any international initiative whereas the other camp seems to believe that the nation is at the "epitome of the times" and a role model for others. Besides, labelling a country medium-sized or middle power does not connote an official appellation, but rather just gives a conceptual framework for foreign policy-making.

Accordingly, in order to achieve the goal of becoming a middle power, diplomacy should always take one step ahead, with its role and effectiveness being further enhanced. Specifically, in diplomatic activities, policy-makers should consider building an ICOR-type index¹ to measure performance; it is thus necessary to (i) create sustainable elements by intertwining interests and values with other partners on the basis of meeting each other's needs; (ii) build long-term and solid foundations for relationships; and (iii) enhance the ability to adjust and adapt to change.

In multilateral diplomacy, Vietnam has endeavoured to build the capacity to initiate, lead, and manage diplomatic ideas, including at times of crisis. Even when there emerge profound differences, the country has proven its ability to resolve. These are the critical avenues that help Vietnam to further enhance its role, position and interests as a middle power. Multilateral diplomacy is a powerful tool, yet realities show that Vietnam needs more capacity and endeavour to bring it into full play.

Vietnam should continue to place ASEAN (as a middle power entity) on top of its diplomatic agenda and associate in part with the ASEAN identity. Former Philippine foreign secretary Del Rosario called on ASEAN to redefine its own leadership, proposing that its three most populous states, namely, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam — join forces to lead ASEAN as a middle power [Time for ASEAN: 4.05.2019].

Incorporating bilateral with multilateral diplomacy as in the case of the APEC 2017 is a smart policy choice. Based on the experience of many medium-sized countries, Vietnam can apply basic elements of a proactive hedging strategy, which includes direct diplomatic engagement with partners and challengers, creating a relatively interdependent economic relationship, combining in-

¹ ICOR = $(K_t - K_{t-1}) / (Y_t - Y_{t-1})$, where K is capital, Y is output, t is reporting period, $t - 1$ represents previous period.

ternal hard balancing (hard power build-up) and soft balancing through bilateral and multilateral relationships on the basis of deepening intertwined interests [Tran Thi Bich 2018-1: 81—82]. It would have been less likely for Vietnam to attract the attention of both the United States and China in 2017 if it had not been an active member of APEC, EAS and ASEAN.

Vietnam should strengthen cooperation and association with other established middle powers, i.e. “horizontal” cooperation. Scholars Rory Medcalf and C. Raja Mohan recommend that middle powers should enhance cooperation among themselves to mitigate adverse effects from US-China competition. According to these scholars, India, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam should work together to propose democratization of international institutions to better reflect the rights, obligations and interests of middle powers [Medcalf and Mohan: 8.08.2014].

Finally, in terms of national identity, Vietnam should continue to sharpen the image and model of Vietnam as a middle power (nation-branding). The model is not for export but rather for enhancing the country’s competitive advantages and complementary values to partners. Recently, some countries have touted the model and identity of an independent, self-reliant Vietnam who always tries to nurture good relations with other countries, including major countries and neighbours, and proactive intergration into the region and the world, first and foremost in Southeast Asia, and successful economic development [North Korean: 5.04.2018]. Certainly, from a middle power perspective, this model needs to be further refined to improve efficiency and sustainability.

Conclusion

On balance, both theoretical references and practical evidences suggest that Vietnam will meet the basic criteria (capability, behaviour, and identity) to become a middle power in the post 2030 period. Realizing this goal, Vietnam will be able to better ensure its security, expand diplomatic influence, and move up on the ladder of economic development. This should also lead to adjustments to Vietnam’s diplomatic behavior. Taking stock of good practices and unleashing the country’s potentials, Vietnam can well look to a feasible and reasonable middle power foreign policy model for the medium term.

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ВЬЕТНАМ НА ПУТИ К ПОЛОЖЕНИЮ СРЕДНЕЙ ДЕРЖАВЫ К 2030 ГОДУ

Аннотация. Новые исследования ряда авторов показывают, что Вьетнам является потенциальным кандидатом на статус «средней державы». Идея основана на том факте, что страна прошла большой путь от изоляции до региональной интеграции и стала активным, ответственным членом международного сообщества. Возможность превращения Вьетнама в среднюю державу все чаще рассматривается учеными и политиками. Эта статья является попыткой выяснить три ключевых аспекта такой возможности, а именно: потенциал Вьетнама, его поведение на международной арене, самобытность. Используя теоретическую базу и набор эмпирических доказательств, структурированных вокруг этих трех аспектов, автор статьи делает вывод, что Вьетнам может достичь основных критериев средней державы в следующем десятилетии и, следовательно, должен соответствующим образом скорректировать свою внешнюю политику.

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика Вьетнама, международная интеграция, средняя держава.

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