

VIETNAM'S ROLE AS A MIDDLE POWER IN THE EVOLVING INDO-PACIFIC GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract: As the third decade of the twenty-first century unfolds, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a central stage for strategic competition among global powers. The rivalry between the United States and China exerts a particularly strong influence, directly shaping the political and security landscape of Southeast Asia as well as the broader Indo-Pacific. Against this backdrop, Vietnam's critical location in the East Sea and Southeast Asia has elevated its prominence in United States foreign policy toward the region. Through a geopolitical perspective supported by qualitative analysis, this study explores Vietnam's strategic importance in the United States' approach to restraining China's growing dominance in Southeast Asia. The findings indicate that Vietnam's land-based proximity to southern China, combined with its rise as a middle-ranking power, positions it as an essential player within the region's evolving security structure. Furthermore, Vietnam's maritime geography along vital trade routes in the East Sea, paired with ongoing tensions with China over maritime sovereignty, underscores its status as a priority partner in United States engagement throughout Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific rivalry, Vietnam's strategic position, U.S.–China competition, East Sea geopolitics

1. INTRODUCTION

As the twenty-first century progresses into its third decade, the landscape of international relations reveals profound shifts in both theory and practice. The traditional dominance of realist approaches in explaining global political behavior is increasingly challenged by the expanding forces of globalization. The growing complexity of economic, institutional, and cultural interdependence among nations has diminished the explanatory power of realism, which struggles to account for the multidimensional connectivity characterizing today's world (Streeten, 2001). Nevertheless, the international system continues to operate under an anarchic framework, where asymmetries in power and volatility in strategic interactions exert substantial influence over national security policies (Lechner, 2017).

Within this uncertain environment, major powers pursue assertive strategies founded on hegemonic ideologies that provoke controversial claims over influence, interests, and sovereignty. These pursuits pose serious challenges to the authority of international law and the stabilizing role of institutions such as the United Nations (Ivankovic, 2015). Diplomatic behavior remains fluid, shaped by ongoing shifts in foreign policy responses and recalibrated relationships, especially between the established global power of the United States and the rising influence of China.

Prior to Xi Jinping's consolidation of power in China, the United States had already begun recalibrating its global strategy in response to emerging regional dynamics. In 2011, President Barack Obama introduced the "rebalance" and "pivot to Asia" initiatives, aimed at reaffirming American leadership amidst the rapid evolution of the Indo-Pacific and the rising strategic presence of China (Winkler, 2023). By 2014, at the twenty-second Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, Beijing formally transitioned its "One Belt, One Road" concept into the Belt and Road Initiative, which became the cornerstone of its global outreach strategy (Thang & Kiet, 2023).

The trajectory of China's foreign policy underwent a pronounced shift in 2017 when the Chinese Communist Party incorporated "Xi Jinping Thought" into its official ideological framework. This move marked a departure from China's previous posture of strategic patience and signaled a more proactive approach to pursuing national rejuvenation through the "China Dream" vision (Schulhof et al., 2022). Responding to these assertive developments, the Trump administration initiated a trade confrontation with China, igniting a direct strategic rivalry between the two global powers for the first time in decades (Hua & Zeng, 2022).

In August 2021, the Biden administration concluded the prolonged military engagement in Afghanistan, signaling a shift in American strategic focus toward the Indo-Pacific. This recalibration was further solidified in October

2022 with the release of the updated National Security Strategy, which emphasized the continuation of efforts to preserve U.S. global leadership (Johnston, 2022). Subsequently, Washington intensified cooperation with regional coalitions such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and deepened bilateral engagements with South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Singapore. It also pursued stronger ties with Southeast Asian nations impacted by China's assertiveness in the East Sea, with particular emphasis on advancing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Vietnam—a key element in the broader Indo-Pacific strategy to counterbalance China's growing influence (Tien & Trang, 2023; White House, 2022).

Vietnam occupies a pivotal geostrategic position within Southeast Asia, particularly as tensions with China over maritime claims in the East Sea continue to shape its foreign policy agenda (Chong, 2020). In response to these persistent challenges, Vietnam actively pursues a strategy of power equilibrium with China while promoting a stable and rules-based regional order. This strategic approach has elevated Vietnam's importance in United States efforts to counteract China's growing assertiveness in the East Sea and broader Indo-Pacific region (Quan, 2022, p.390).

The significance of Vietnam's role was underscored in November 2017, when former U.S. President Donald Trump, speaking at the APEC forum in Da Nang, described his visit to Vietnam as a privilege, referring to the country as "the heart of the Indo-Pacific" (U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam, 2017). In April 2018, the U.S. State Department formally articulated the Indo-Pacific Strategy, placing Vietnam at the center of efforts to deepen cooperation across key strategic domains (Huong, 2018). This direction was reinforced by the Biden administration on February 11, 2022, through the updated Indo-Pacific Strategy, which reiterated a commitment to elevating the U.S.–Vietnam partnership (White House, 2022). A year later, in 2023, Vietnam and the United States officially launched a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, marking a breakthrough in bilateral relations and signaling a new phase of strategic convergence (U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam, 2023).

The emergence of Vietnam as a core partner in Washington's Indo-Pacific framework reflects a broader geopolitical calculation. With its land-based proximity to southern China and its stature as a rising middle power, Vietnam is seen as a linchpin in maintaining balance and curbing regional hegemonic tendencies. Additionally, Vietnam's maritime geography—situated along vital East Sea shipping routes—reinforces its centrality in safeguarding regional security architecture.

This study seeks to systematically examine Vietnam's evolving geopolitical relevance to the United States in the context of intensifying strategic competition with China. Specifically, it evaluates two interlinked dimensions: Vietnam's continental significance as a terrestrial neighbor to China and its influence as a middle-ranking regional actor; and its maritime strategic role in protecting crucial sea lanes in contested waters. The findings aim to illuminate Vietnam's positioning as an indispensable partner for U.S. policy in Southeast Asia.

The research carries both theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on small and middle powers navigating complex great-power rivalries, enriching contemporary geopolitical theory within international relations. Practically, it offers insights for Vietnamese policymakers to better understand the country's strategic leverage and design informed foreign policy choices that secure national interests amid an evolving regional order.

2. STRATEGIC GEOGRAPHY AND THE EVOLUTION OF GEOPOLITICAL THOUGHT

Across the arc of human history, geography has consistently played a defining role in how nations project power and secure influence. From ancient military treatises to modern strategic theory, the recognition of spatial dynamics has shaped both war-making and statecraft. Early reflections on geography's importance can be found in classical works such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* from the Chinese Spring and Autumn period and historical Vietnamese writings on warfare from the Trần dynasty, which highlighted terrain and timing as decisive elements in military success.

In the late nineteenth century, American naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan introduced a foundational maritime perspective on geopolitical power. His landmark study, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, identified six critical factors that determine a nation's naval strength. Mahan argued that dominance at sea required a powerful navy, strategic port infrastructure, unrestricted access to major shipping routes, and a robust merchant fleet engaged in international trade. He emphasized that control over maritime corridors was essential for both economic prosperity and military effectiveness, especially during wartime, when commercial vessels could assist military logistics and troop movement (Mahan, 2019, pp. 102–130).

Meanwhile, in the early twentieth century, British geographer Halford Mackinder presented a contrasting view focused on continental geography. Through his Heartland Theory, he proposed that global power hinged not on naval capabilities, but on control over the central expanse of the Eurasian landmass. Mackinder famously stated that the ability to govern Eastern Europe would open access to the Heartland, which would in turn grant influence over the World Island and ultimately the entire globe (Rosenberg, 2018). His theory positioned the Eurasian interior as the fulcrum of global strategy (Dan, 2014, p. 51).

Although Mahan and Mackinder offered distinct strategic visions—one rooted in naval supremacy, the other in land-based control—they both underscored the enduring significance of geography in national security planning and global policymaking. Their contributions remain pillars of geopolitical thought, forming the analytical foundation upon which states continue to build strategic choices in a competitive international arena.

Over the course of modern history, geopolitical thought has journeyed from controversial origins to a critical discipline in international affairs. In 1922, German political geographer Karl Haushofer founded the Munich Institute of Geopolitics, formalizing the study of spatial politics as a scientific field rooted in geography and power analysis (Efferink, 2009). Haushofer defined geopolitics as a national science concerned with how space determines political behavior. However, the discipline suffered a setback when its concepts were manipulated under fascist ideology in Nazi Germany. The “Lebensraum” theory, based on Friedrich Ratzel’s political geography, was weaponized by Adolf Hitler to legitimize aggressive expansionism, ultimately resulting in unprecedented atrocities and the stigmatization of geopolitical research across much of the socialist and developing world throughout the twentieth century.

It was not until the twenty-first century that geopolitics regained academic legitimacy and global relevance. With the rise of multipolarity, regional competition, and technological revolution, geopolitics became essential for understanding the changing dynamics of power. The acceleration of globalization has blurred territorial boundaries, reshaped economic flows, and introduced new complexities into the strategic calculus of nation-states. In this new era, geopolitics is no longer a narrow field; it has evolved into a comprehensive lens through which trade, connectivity, security, and diplomatic behavior are analyzed.

In Vietnam, contemporary scholars have revisited geopolitical theory with renewed interest, seeing it as a valuable foundation for crafting national strategies. Dao Minh Hong and Le Hong Hiep, in their compilation of international relations terminology, describe geopolitics as a study of how physical geography—such as terrain, climate, and resources—influences state actions and global positioning (Hong & Hiep, 2013, p.47). Nguyen Van Dan further defines geopolitics as the discipline examining the relationship between spatial configurations and power projection, highlighting its direct link to geostrategy in foreign policy planning (Dan, 2014, p.18). In his work on Vietnam’s role in the twenty-first century, Luong Van Ke characterizes geopolitics as an applied science analyzing global political trends through spatial and temporal dimensions to optimize national interests within the evolving international system (Ke, 2016, p.26).

Despite increasing attention, geopolitical research in Vietnam remains nascent, with limited institutional depth and academic output. However, Vietnamese scholars are actively contributing to global discourse. Luong Van Ke, for instance, has synthesized traditional geopolitical theories while focusing on Vietnam’s strategic land borders with Cambodia, Laos, and China, as well as its maritime posture in relation to East Asian powers like Japan and South Korea (Ke, 2016, p.302).

Internationally, the revitalization of geopolitical theory has fostered new approaches tailored to regional contexts. Theodor Tudoroiu expanded upon Stefano Guzzini’s neoclassical perspectives to introduce the Regional Security Complex Theory, which maps post-Soviet power structures across Europe and Eurasia (Tudoroiu, 2018). Meanwhile, Nabi Allah Rasnoo utilized classical frameworks from Mahan, Mackinder, and Dugin to explore instability and transformation in the Middle East and North Africa (Rasnoo, 2013).

In essence, modern geopolitics integrates spatial logic with systemic analysis, enabling nations to assess risk, prioritize alliances, and identify strategic opportunities. While definitions vary, the core premise remains clear: geography profoundly shapes a country’s political behavior, its security posture, and its ability to navigate an increasingly fluid international order.

5. Vietnam’s Strategic Land-Based Role in U.S. Efforts to Counter China in Southeast Asia

From a mainland geopolitical standpoint, Vietnam presents a compelling case for strategic importance in United States foreign policy aimed at containing China’s rising influence in Southeast Asia. Historically, Vietnam’s fierce resistance to foreign domination shaped its political identity and global image. In the twentieth century, it stood at the forefront of anti-colonial struggle, confronting U.S. intervention during the Vietnam War. The conflict not only undermined U.S. efforts to stop Soviet ideological expansion but also fueled national liberation movements across the globe and marked the decline of classical imperialism (Berman and Routh, 2003).

Following this period of protracted hostility, bilateral relations remained frozen for years, with the United States imposing sanctions and diplomatic isolation until ties were officially restored in 1995 after the Cold War. In the twenty-first century, the global balance of power began shifting toward Asia, intensifying the strategic relevance of Vietnam amid China’s ascension as a major regional and global challenger to American dominance.

Under President Barack Obama’s leadership, Washington launched the “pivot to Asia” policy, reorienting political and defense commitments to the Indo-Pacific to address the emerging competition with Beijing (Lieberthal, 2011). Vietnam’s geography places it at the center of this regional contest. Serving as a land bridge between the expansive Eurasian continent and the dynamic Southeast Asian sub-region, Vietnam occupies 331,212 square kilometers and borders China to the north, along with Laos and Cambodia to the southwest (Lohman, 2020). With a dense

population and abundant terrestrial resources, Vietnam has emerged as a preferred partner in Washington's strategy to counter China's maritime assertiveness and political sway over neighboring countries (Marciel, 2023). One key aspect of Vietnam's land-based strategic utility lies in its topography. Mountainous terrain has historically offered natural protection against invasions, complicating offensive operations for any adversary. Research by Markus Tannheimer and Raimund Lechner underscores this by noting that mountain combat environments consistently diminish offensive capacity, increase casualty rates, and disrupt conventional tactics (Tannheimer and Lechner, 2021). These geographic challenges affect operational planning and execution, providing defenders a tactical advantage through superior mobility and concealment.

The importance of mountainous defense is widely reflected in classic military doctrines ranging from Carl von Clausewitz's writings in Europe to Sun Tzu's strategic principles in China and the military strategies of Vietnamese general Tran Quoc Tuan. Although contemporary military technologies, such as air forces and precision weapons, have altered the impact of terrain on warfare, geography still plays a critical role—particularly when an adversary is well-prepared and strategically entrenched.

In summary, Vietnam's mainland geopolitical value stems not only from its strategic location and resource base but also from the natural defensive advantages embedded in its terrain. These factors collectively reinforce Vietnam's status as an emerging middle power and a vital component of the United States' Indo-Pacific calculus to contain China's expansive ambitions.

According to Thao (2011), Vietnam shares a 1,065-kilometer land border with China, running through seven northern provinces from Điện Biên to Quảng Ninh. This zone features rugged terrain with elevations exceeding 3,000 meters in the northwest, descending toward lower hills and coastal plains in the east. Dense forests, deep valleys, and steep slopes dominate much of the landscape, creating natural obstacles to military mobility and invasion.

This topography offers strategic depth against Chinese advances, particularly in the northern-central corridor. The Central Highlands further reinforce Vietnam's defensive posture, forming a series of plateaus suitable for deploying long-range weaponry and establishing coastal security zones (Hai, 2011). Additionally, Vietnam's longstanding alliance with Laos, grounded in the 1977 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, strengthens regional stability amid growing Chinese influence (Giang, 2021).

Despite these geographical buffers, vulnerable lowland stretches in Lạng Sơn and Quảng Ninh could enable military incursions. Marshall (2021, pp. 76–80) notes that historical conflicts stem in part from such terrain, which has allowed China to project force southward for centuries. Still, dense forest cover and steep gradients hinder GPS surveillance and fast offensives, making guerrilla warfare effective. This was evident in the 1979 border war, when difficult terrain slowed China's push toward Hanoi (Vietnam Military History Institute, 2015, p.164).

Elevated positions along the border provide clear vantage points for defensive observation and strategic planning. Clausewitz (2014, p.247) emphasized that high ground offers psychological and tactical superiority, allowing forces to monitor enemy activity while maintaining security.

Historically, regions like Cao Bằng became revolutionary strongholds due to their mountainous isolation and natural barriers. Ha (2021) describes how rivers, forests, and rugged passes supported guerrilla networks and complicated French military operations.

Vietnam's terrain makes it a key asset for U.S. regional defense strategies but also raises caution. The Vietnamese government, committed to its “four-no's” policy, remains wary of becoming a proxy in any great power confrontation.

As Hiep (2014) argues, Vietnam suffers from a “geographical curse”—situated beside a much larger and stronger neighbor. With China's landmass 29 times greater and population 14 times larger, the power imbalance is stark. China's 2023 GDP of \$17.5 trillion dwarfs Vietnam's \$430 billion, and bilateral trade hit \$171.84 billion, cementing economic dependence (Vietnam Central Economic Committee, 2024).

This asymmetry underscores a persistent challenge for Vietnam: defending sovereignty and securing strategic autonomy while navigating an uneven power relationship with China.

Vietnam's geographic proximity to China has shaped a complex and historically contentious bilateral relationship, often described as a “geographical curse” (Hiep, 2014). Positioned adjacent to a rising global superpower that has demonstrated assertive ambitions—particularly in the East Sea with incidents like the 1988 Gạc Ma naval clash—Vietnam faces ongoing security pressure. China's mix of soft and hard power strategies has prompted Vietnam to adopt a “hedging” foreign policy, aiming to protect national interests while cautiously navigating its asymmetric relationship with Beijing.

This strategic adaptation has involved deepening ties with major powers such as the United States, Japan, and India. Amid globalization and multilateralism, Vietnam has sought both cooperation and competition with China to close development gaps and assert greater autonomy. This balancing act has enabled the U.S. to establish a stronger strategic foothold in Vietnam's foreign relations.

By the twenty-first century, Vietnam had evolved into a prominent middle power in Southeast Asia (Do, 2022). Its economic transformation has been striking: from a GDP of \$13 billion in 1986 (Doanh, 2021) to \$409 billion

by 2022, ranking fifth in the region (Quynh, 2023), with projections of reaching third place in 2023. Scholar Hamada Kazuyuki emphasizes, “Vietnam is currently the best-performing economy in Asia... and may enter the global top 20 by 2048” (Kazuyuki, 2021, p.270).

Vietnam’s diplomacy has mirrored this growth. It maintains seven Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with powers including China, Russia, India, South Korea, the United States, Japan, and Australia (Dat, 2023), alongside 30 strategic partnerships and formal relations with 192 countries and territories. Its near-unanimous election to the UN Security Council (192/193 votes) for the 2020–2021 term signaled a rising global stature.

Amid intensified U.S.–China rivalry, Vietnam has also become a key destination for relocating global supply chains. U.S. companies like Apple, Intel, Boeing, Google, and Walmart have shifted operations to Vietnam, with Samsung now manufacturing 60% of its global smartphones there (Dung, 2023; Phuc, 2021). This shift simultaneously boosts Vietnam’s economic clout and weakens China’s production dominance.

Despite growing U.S. engagement, Vietnam remains committed to peace and autonomy. Guided by “bamboo diplomacy,” it seeks flexible equilibrium between competing powers, refusing full alignment with either side (Que, 2019, p.400). As a result, modern Vietnam has emerged as a stabilizing force and a strategic pivot in Southeast Asia’s evolving security architecture.

Vietnam’s Maritime Geopolitics and Its Strategic Value to the United States

Vietnam occupies a critical maritime position along key shipping arteries linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Among the world’s ten major sea routes, five intersect with or pass through the East Sea, which carries roughly one-third of global commercial shipping (Garnier, 2012). Disruption in these waters would divert traffic around Southeast Asia’s island nations, prolonging voyages and inflating logistical risks and costs—especially compared to the strategic Malacca Strait. This narrow maritime corridor, vital for Asian trade flows, underpins China’s concern over the “Malacca Dilemma”: in a conflict scenario, the U.S. Navy could block the strait, threatening China’s energy imports and export routes (Shambaugh, 2021, p.10; Paszak, 2021).

Vietnam faces direct threats from China’s expansive “nine-dash line” claim, which challenges its sovereignty and reflects Beijing’s ambition to dominate East Sea trade chokepoints. Despite Vietnam’s improvements, its naval capability ranks 38th globally—still far behind China’s second-place navy. The resulting power asymmetry fuels instability and tensions in maritime security governance.

In response, Vietnam pursues a dual approach. While maintaining dialogue with China, it also strengthens global partnerships and supports the United Nations’ role in upholding international law and peace (Hanh & Hung, 2021). Strategic ties with powers like Japan, India, the United States, and European nations help rebalance influence and open space for closer U.S.–Vietnam cooperation.

With over 3,260 kilometers of coastline and jurisdictional control over nearly one million square kilometers of sea area, Vietnam possesses rich maritime resources and geostrategic depth (Tien, 2011). Its resolute stance on sovereignty over the Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa archipelagos aligns with U.S. efforts to counter Chinese expansion. Naval theorist Alfred Mahan emphasized that mastery of sea trade routes drives national strength and global stature (Mahan, 2019, pp. 25–26). Vietnam’s location—adjacent to China’s busiest eastern seaboard and maritime gateways—positions it as a pivotal player in safeguarding regional shipping lanes.

China’s rise since 1978 has intensified its dependence on East Sea trade, with over a billion people fueling industrial demand and coastal regions serving as its economic core (Deledi, 2022; Ferdinand, 2016). Consequently, Vietnam’s maritime posture is central to regional power dynamics—and a strategic asset for U.S. policy aimed at sustaining a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Vietnam holds a critical maritime position along vital trade corridors linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Five of the world’s ten busiest sea lanes cross or connect to the East Sea, carrying nearly one-third of global commercial traffic (Garnier, 2012). If obstructed, ships would be forced to reroute, adding costs and delays. The most strategic chokepoint—Malacca Strait—is central to the flow of goods and oil into Southeast and Northeast Asia. China’s vulnerability here, known as the “Malacca Dilemma,” underscores its reliance on uninterrupted sea access for energy and trade (Shambaugh, 2021, p.10; Paszak, 2021).

Vietnam’s maritime geography sits adjacent to China’s coastal hubs and directly intersects these essential trade routes, giving Hanoi potential leverage in wartime scenarios. In strategic cooperation, Vietnam enables the U.S. to expand naval operations, increase surveillance, and track China’s activities more effectively. As a “wild card” in regional waters, Vietnam’s support helps balance power and reinforce efforts to deter Chinese hegemony. Under President Biden, U.S.–Vietnam ties have deepened into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with renewed focus on Southeast Asia’s geopolitical dynamics (Shambaugh, 2021, p.83).

Japan, a key U.S. ally, also relies heavily on the East Sea: nearly 80% of its trade and 90% of its imported oil pass through these lanes (Que & Thuy, 2021). China’s proximity to contested maritime zones puts Japanese security at risk, especially if Beijing solidifies claims over Vietnam’s Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa archipelagos (Liu & Wang, 2013; Kiet, 2023). This vulnerability drives Japan’s defense modernization and motivates U.S. leadership to protect its allies’ maritime access (Hughes, 2016; Lopez, 2021).

Beyond strategic partnerships, economic interdependence amplifies the stakes. Roughly \$1.2 trillion in U.S. goods transit the East Sea annually (Ke, 2016, p.356), meaning rising tensions pose direct risks to American companies and global supply chains. As the world's premier naval power, the U.S. is heavily invested in maintaining freedom of navigation and a rules-based order in this maritime region.

Vietnam's 3,260-kilometer coastline and deep-water ports such as Cam Ranh and Nha Trang reinforce its strategic utility. Cam Ranh Bay in particular is recognized as a natural fortress—defensible, hard to attack, and positioned to control movements across the East Sea and between two oceans (Vietnamese People's Public Security Newspaper, 2011). During French colonial rule, the bay served as a key military base for operations in Southeast Asia, supporting naval, air, and ground forces with repair, resupply, and shelter capabilities, including protection against aerial and nuclear strikes (French Overseas Ministry Order No. 48/1447).

Cam Ranh remains integral to Vietnam's defense architecture. Its terrain and location provide strategic depth in maritime conflicts, particularly as China militarizes features in contested waters. Ultimately, Vietnam's geographic and infrastructural assets offer the U.S. both deterrence value and operational flexibility across the Indo-Pacific theater.

Vietnam holds a central position in the United States' strategy to contain China's growing influence in Southeast Asia. On land, its complex border terrain and strategic depth near China offer natural defense advantages and serve as a potential location for U.S. military coordination. Historical conflicts and unequal power dynamics have shaped a cautious foreign policy, allowing Vietnam to maintain relations with China while strengthening partnerships with countries like the United States, Japan and India.

From the maritime perspective, Vietnam sits along essential trade routes in the East Sea. Its extensive coastline, deep seaports and offshore islands offer critical support for surveillance operations and naval logistics. Cam Ranh Bay and the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa archipelagos represent military strongholds that align with the interests of both Vietnam and the United States in preserving maritime security and freedom of navigation.

As a rising middle power, Vietnam contributes to regional peace and balances the pressure from China's assertive actions. However, the lessons from global conflict zones such as Ukraine remind Vietnamese leadership to carefully assess risks and maintain strategic autonomy. Strengthening ties with the United States presents both opportunities and challenges as Vietnam navigates its role in the China–Vietnam–United States triangle.

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