



BALTIC JOURNAL OF LAW & POLITICS

A Journal of Vytautas Magnus University

VOLUME 15, NUMBER 1 (2022)

ISSN 2029-0454



Cite: *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 15:1 (2022): 377-388

DOI: 10.2478/bjlp-2022-00025

Vietnam's Regional Security Strategy in The Context of France's Pivot to Asia

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Received: November 8, 2021; reviews: 2; accepted: June 23, 2022.

Abstract

The study centered on the selection of security strategy of Vietnam as a middle power of Asian. Regarding the coverage of the study, it was conducted in the context of France's pivot to Asia in the period from 2012 to now. By empirical analysis approach, the article clarifies the selection of a mixed strategy of Vietnam. The empirical analysis is performed on the basis of interpretation, explanation and prediction of Vietnam's strategic options in reliance on the available resources and the current strategic environment. It is argued that the regional security strategies of middle powers could be in two forms, namely, functional ones by which the middle powers pool their own resources to address their own

particular issues, and normative ones by which the middle powers spur the broadly accepted standards of multilateralism. It is assumed that regardless of functional or normative strategies, the available resources and strategic environment are the fundamentals. Available resources are assets which a country owns and employ to guarantee its essential interests while the strategic environment covers the perception of risks suffered by the country as well as the characteristics of security structure where that country is positioned. As a result, a number of policy options can be proposed for Vietnam based on available resources and strategic environment with French involvement.

Keywords

Asia, regional security, pivot policy, France, Vietnam, middle powers, strategic options, major countries, strategic adjustment, foreign policy, environmental security, multilateralism.

Introduction

Since the first work of François GODEMENT (2014) on France's pivot to Asia, a lot of researchers have analyzed various policy-related issues such as objectives of policies De Albuquerque and Winkler (2010); V. U. T. P. Le et al. (2022); O'Hanlon and Teng (2005); Terres (2015), realization measures of policies and realization practices of policies (Gomart; Le Corre & Pollack, 2017; Regaud, 2016a; Terres, 2016).

Asia was once forgotten for a long time after World War II when Paris paid much attention to building Europe, targeted its neighbors and placed primary emphasis on Africa in its foreign policy (Terres, 2016). France paid little attention to Asia as the region is far from France and less ingrained to its national interests (Bachelier, 2018). In the context where Asia-Pacific gradually becomes the center and strong driving force for the global economic growth, the world's powers, especially the US, however, have "pivoted" to the region. At this point, Paris has changed its viewpoint and figured out the significant benefits from the push for cooperation with Asia (Fraenkel & Smith, 2022).

Situated in the center of an area stretching from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, Vietnam is of strategic significance to France's strategic contemplations towards Asia, at the same time, suffers from the opposite effects from the strategic adjustment. However, neither studies have clarified the position of Vietnam in France's pivot to Asia nor policies suitable for Vietnam are proposed.

Vietnam is in a strategically important position in the region. It is the bridge on land between the largest part of Asia and Europe continents and Southeast Asia, situated on an accessible sea corridor involving up to 50% of the world's cargo volume. In spite of its position of a small country in Southeast Asia, Vietnam's territory stretches and surrounds almost entirely one side of the South China Sea. Looking at the map, it can be seen that Vietnam is the only Southeast Asian country both owning the territory on the Asian continent and

bordering the South China Sea. Vietnam is also the country that controls the largest number of islands in Spratly. The route connecting the key points from the Bering Strait to Indonesia passes through Da Nang, Vietnam. Moreover, Cam Ranh military port, Nha Trang is one of the most ideal deep-water ports in the world, characterized by the favorable hydrological and geological conditions, quite regular and relatively punctual tide in the bay, flat bay bed made of quite solid alluvial sand... In other words, Cam Ranh port is a naval base with an extremely solid defense position, an ideal "launcher" for customs forces to control South China Sea.

This article is intended to make an empirical contribution to the study on Asia's middle powers, supplement the researches on international relations that have historically focused on just leading powers, and give the answer to the questions, namely, "What is Vietnam's position in the France's pivot to Asia? Which regional security policy is appropriate for Vietnam in a strategic environment with the French involvement?"

Methods and Materials

The approach of comparing and contrasting went into proving two issues. The first is the strategic adjustment to the Asian region in the overall foreign policy of France toward key players in the world. The second is the change in priority order for Asia over presidential terms of office.

The quantitative - statistical approach was adopted to clarify the practice of realization of France's the policy in this region, focusing on two main aspects, namely, economy and external relations, and the impacts of the policy on Vietnam in terms of economy, politics, security and defense.

The approach of empirical analysis tended to seek the ways of describing objectively the norms of Vietnam at the position of one of middle powers in Asia.

The approach of experiment was adopted to confirm the results of empirical analysis of Vietnam's norms, showing the practical relation to the strategy selection of Vietnam in the environment with French involvement.

Spatially, the Asia-Pacific region, of which Vietnam is the typical case, is the subject of the study. In terms of time, the period subject to the study is from 2012 to present, i.e., from the beginning of the presidency of François Hollande (2012-2017) to the presidency of Emmanuel Macron (2017-2022).

It is argued that Vietnam's selection of regional security strategy depends on two variables, namely, available resources and strategic environment. Firstly, the comparisons between Vietnam-France relations before and after the realization of France's pivot was made. Following that, the interferences of the policy with the Asia's security environment had been analyzed. Drawing on this, the discussion focused on the fact that Vietnam as a middle power adopts a mixed strategy with functional and normative features in the environment with French involvement.

Resultants

As a partner with traditional relations with France, Vietnam plays an important role in the France's pivot to Asia. French leaders viewed Vietnam as the gateway for France to create its influence in Asia. In 1994, the French Embassy in Vietnam declared: "France's Vietnam policy is considered on a regional scale... benefits both countries. France can support Vietnam in building a good relationship with Europe while Vietnam facilitates France in gaining the foothold in Asia. It is a springboard for France's return to Asia." Since the declaration was released, French leaders have always given a priority to the development of relations between France and Vietnam in France's pivot to Asia, clearly attested through bilateral operations in various fields.

In terms of diplomatic relations, in February 1993, François Mitterrand, the first-ever President of France, paid an official visit to Vietnam. Since then, mutual visits between high-level leaders have been organized continuously. In 2013, the relationship between the two countries had a turning point attributable to the fact that the Governments of the two countries agreed on elevation of the bilateral relation to the strategic partnership. The two countries undertook to maintain the existing dialogue mechanism between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Ministries of Defence, and communication channels between the two Parliaments and between localities, continued to actively contribute to various regional and multilateral networks, such as the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, UNESCO, that both countries join.

Vietnam remain unchanging its goal of ensuring its national sovereignty and security as well as territorial integrity in every historical periods, especially in the Doi Moi (Innovation) era. As a party involved in the South China Sea dispute and threatened by China's growing power and assertiveness, Vietnam benefits from a rules-based regional without resorting to the threat or use of force.

France has had its military presence in Vietnam for a long time. In the context of increasing tensions between China and the West in the Indian Ocean, especially due to the South China Sea dispute, France is increasingly keen to assert its role in this region. In that sense, France has recently opened regular patrols to ensure the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. In this region, France regularly organized multilateral exercises, such as Papangue in the Indian Ocean, Equateur, Croix du Sud and Marara in the Pacific Ocean. In SEA, France participated in the exercises such as Cobra Gold, Komodo, Coores, Marixs or Ulchi Freedom Guardian, Key Resolve, Khaan Quest in Northeast Asia. Particularly in Oceania and Pacific, France regularly participated in RIMPAC, Pacific Partnership and Kakadu. France committed to maintain the freedom of navigation and overflight, at the same time, emphasized the importance of peaceful settlement of disputes without resorting to the threat or use of force. This is also exactly what Vietnam seeks to promote with the aim of creating a rallying flag to call for the support of France and other countries in the cause of defense of its sovereignty over sea and island.

In terms of defense-security cooperation, in the 1990s of XX century, France was the first Western country to establish the defense relations with Vietnam. After opening the Storey (2012), Vietnam-France defense cooperation had been engaged in the field of military medicine before expanding to other fields such as training, hydrology, peacekeeping and strategic dialogue. Many large ships of France have visited Cam Ranh International Port so that the naval forces of the two countries had opportunities to coordinate in joint exercises in search and rescue as well as practice of Code of conduct for unexpected meetings at sea. As of July 2020, there were 23 visits of France's naval ships to Vietnam.

In 2009, an agreement was signed to formalize the bilateral defense cooperation. In September 2018, the French and Vietnamese Ministers of Defence concluded an amendment of the ten-year extension to the same. Annual Joint Committee meetings have been organized in the form of Dialogues on strategic issues and defense cooperation. The dialogues have covered all defense-related issues and focused on three key aspects of strategy, military cooperation, and weapons and equipment. Thus, the Dialogues increase the mutual comprehension of defense policy and are the opportunities for the countries to share their geostrategic analyses.

The key cooperation activities carried out by the Defense Attaché Office have contributed to improving the professional capacity of Vietnamese officers, typically, Language practice in France, international French course at Rochefort (CIFR), Officer training at the War College (Edg) of Paris, Officer training (Special military school of Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan, Naval Officer School), training in specialized schools (Artillery School in Draguignan, Military Schools of Saumur, Bourges, etc.), advanced training (training courses for unit commanders, Staff College in Compiègne, etc.) and professional training (Military medicine).

In addition, Vietnamese experts have been invited to attend international conferences and seminars such as international seminars organized by IHEDN (Institut de Hautes Etudes de la Défense), workshops to share the experience in State's actions at sea and peacekeeping operations.

In terms of support for the defense industry, delegations of the Vietnamese Army were invited to attend exhibitions on defense-involved equipment such as EUROSATORY, EURONAVAL and Bourget (aerospace and aviation industries).

In terms of economic investment, as of June 20, 2019, France ranked third among European countries (behind British Virgin Islands and the Netherlands) and 15th out of 132 countries and territories investing in Vietnam. France owned 542 valid investment projects and the total registered investment capital of more than USD 3,560 billion (Q. H. Le & Nguyen, 2020). The foreign direct investment of France has been funded into the fields of information and communication, services, production, electricity and water distribution, air conditioning, industry and agriculture, commodity distribution, entertainment, construction and banking finance. France's investment capital was mainly in the form of joint venture, business cooperation contracts, 100% foreign direct investment while the rest was

in the form of joint stock companies, BTO, BT and BOT. The average scope of a project of France was USD 11.59 million/project (at low level, compared to USD 15 million/project on average) (N. P. Le, 2020).

Two-way trade turnover between Vietnam and France achieved remarkable growth with the average growth rate of 8.5%/year in the period 2015 - 2019, leading to an increase from about USD 1.6 billion in 2009 to USD 5.3 billion in 2019 (ranked third in Europe, behind Germany and the Netherlands) (see table 1). The two countries signed most of the necessary documents such as framework agreement on economic cooperation, agreement on investment encouragement and protection, double taxation agreement and a series of cooperation agreements in specific areas.

Table 1. Import-export turnover between Vietnam - France (2011-2019)
 (Unit: USD million)

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Export from Vietnam	1659	2163	2206	2399	2952	2999	3351	3760	3760
Import from France	1205	1589	995	1143	1260	1137	1271	1340	1818

Source: General Department of Vietnam Customs, 2019

Currently, France is Europe's the third bilateral ODA sponsor to Vietnam (following Germany and Austria). Vietnam ranks second among the largest beneficiaries of France's bilateral ODA in Asia (following Afghanistan). Vietnam is one of few countries to enjoy the entire Market Profile of France, which consist of three financial aid channels of France, namely, official development aid from treasury, and concessional loans from the French Development Agency (AFD) and from the Fund of Solidarity Priority (FSP) (French Development Agency, 2020).

It can be affirmed that Vietnam's position has been increasingly elevated in the France's pivot to Asia. In the context of the strategic environment with French involvement and after assessing Vietnam's mixed regional security strategy, a number of policies for Vietnam are proposed as follows:

First, combining bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy are two important pillars of Vietnam's foreign policy (Dang, 2018). The attention should be paid to the uniformity and proper integration between both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in practice since the strong development of the multilateral diplomacy is dependent on bilateral diplomacy. The well-connected relationship with other countries is also one of preconditions for Vietnam to receive the support during multilateral negotiations. In the context of increasing unilateralism and great power politics, the Vietnam-France strategic partnership is of strategic significance to call for the French support for enhancing Vietnam's resilience against the unpredictable intention of China in territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Vietnam needs to rely on the operational axes of the French policy to develop and deepen the strategic partnership between Vietnam and France in all fields, namely, politics, diplomacy, defense, security, economics, trade, investment, response to climate change, sustainable development, science

and technology, education - training, French language, law and justice, healthcare, local cooperation local, people-to-people exchange, culture and tourism. In addition, Vietnam is imperative to actively work in regional and multilateral networks that both countries involve such as Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, UNESCO and UN's peacekeeping operations, strive to become a responsible member of the international community, and enlist the support of France and other countries in multilateral forums.

Secondly, regularly maintaining bilateral mechanisms; expanding consultation mechanisms; strengthening strategic dialogues and defense cooperation, continuing cooperation in officer training, especially in the field of French language learning, basic and in-depth training and peacekeeping operations; strengthening cooperation in the aspect of defense-involved equipment based on the needs and responsiveness of each country; reaffirming the desire to promote the maritime security exchange to cope with crises at the South China Sea and China's "after everything else" strategy to assert Vietnam's sovereignty claims over nearly the entire South China Sea (Bradford, 2005).

Thirdly, balancing relations with major countries. The "strategic balance" policy gives the powers the equal shares of responsibility for Vietnam's autonomy-stability under the "four noes" principle (no joining military alliances, no affiliating with one country to combat another, no allowing any foreign country to set up its own military bases or to use Vietnam's territory to combat another and no using force or threatening to use force in international relations (Nguyen & Parnell, 2019). International competition trends and strategic adjustments of major countries, including France, towards Asia, have posed plenty of challenges to Vietnam in terms of normative principles and adaption to new movements in relations with major countries. Vietnam should adopt the Inside-Out approach, which is considering internal force as the key, in combination with building multilateral and bilateral diplomatic relations with external partners to cope with the pressure posed by the political movements of major countries.

Discussion

Since the 1990s, French leaders, through a series of official speeches and documents highlighting the economic potential of Asia, have viewed the region as a leading strategic challenge which they should conquer (Bondaz, 2013; Regaud, 2017);. France's presence in this region is nothing new but still quite fuzzy. Since the mid-1990s, France has established high-level dialogues and strategic partnerships with Japan, China and India in 1995, 1997 and 1998, respectively (GODEMENT, 2014; Regaud, 2016b). President Jacques Chirac signed defense treaties with Singapore and Malaysia while during the presidency of Nicholas Sarkozy, France was closer to India despite the prolonged tension between this Asian country and China from 2008-2009 (GODEMENT, 2014; Regaud, 2016b).

President François Hollande, from taking his office in 2012, expressed his desire to have the clearer and more comprehensive French presence in the Asia-

Pacific. Despite the direct competition with the United States, France has been stepping up its regional strategy to the region to limit China's influence. The 2013 White Paper on Defence and National Security has given Asia a priority and urged France to increase engagement with the continent (French, 2013).

France's pivot to Asia was further recognized and strengthened during Emmanuel Macron's presidency as France's security strategy 2017 took account of the key role of the Asia-Pacific region (Velut et al., 2019). France has built a high-level Asian security strategy in combination with the development of the Indo-Pacific concept since 2018; French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2019).

The fundamental goal of France's pivot to Asia is to regain its strategic position in this region, in other words, it wants to play its roles. However, "pivoting to Asia is not a movement effect, but because France wants to be present in an area where the future world is being built" (Baquiast, 1956). The idea of France's pivot is not the same to USA's "pivot" or "rebalance" policy in the Asia-Pacific realized in 2011 during the presidency of Barack Obama (Mackinder, 2004). France's "pivot" focuses on no military restructuring in the region but significantly on economic and diplomatic operations (Terres, 2015). Specifically, France's pivot policy fixes the attention on addressing two key issues, firstly, search for new commercial markets, secondly, diversification and deepening of strategic partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region (GODEMENT, 2014). The realization of "France's pivot to Asia" policy places greater emphasis on four measures.

Firstly, in terms of diplomatic strategy, France maintains regular political dialogues through a series of bilateral diplomatic operations with its partners in the region, increases the frequency of official military-political visits to the Asian nations. From the very first months of François Hollande's five-year presidency, namely from May 2012 to November 2013, 33 State-level visits had been paid to Asia, much higher than 13 ones in the previous two years. During his five-years office, President Hollande traveled to Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam in 2012, 2015 and 2016, respectively (Bachelier, 2018). One month before leaving Elysée Palace, the French president, as head of state, paid his last visit to three Southeast Asian countries, namely, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia from March 26 to 30, 2017. President Hollande not only went to Asia personally but also mobilized the government led by Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, followed by Prime Minister Manuel Valls to stand with him in this visit. The two prime ministers have been the highest-level French leaders since the late 1980s, who visited Thailand. In addition to visiting or sending the highest-level envoys of his government to Asia, President Hollande also utilized a team of French diplomats around the world and embassies to expand Paris's pivot to Asia (O'Hanlon & Teng, 2005). Since taking his office in France in 2017, President Emmanuel Macron has paid seven State-level visits to Asia. He has traveled and worked in countries such as China (2018 and 2019), India (2018) and Japan (2019) (Zueva & Timofeev, 2019). Former French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe paid a visit to Vietnam in 2018. It can be seen that although the number of visits to Asia by President Emmanuel Macron is not so much

as those of former President Hollande, he still gives the priority to the region with dynamic pace of development (O'Hanlon & Teng, 2005).

Followed by this, France has developed a network of strategic partners in the Asia-Pacific region with India, Australia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam (Yates, 1960). These partners are countries that share common values and interests with France, support multilateralism and laws based on the international order, at the same time, aim at a safer and comprehensive global governance-based world.

Furthermore, France increases its involvement in the regional security structure through strengthening relations between France and ASEAN and central organizations, including those within the framework of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM+), increasing its participation in forums such as Asia Coast Guard Forum (HACGAM), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) or Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), and, more broadly, showing its increased presence at all regional and sub-regional forums, especially the Pacific Islands Forum of which France acts as the dialogue partner, Pacific Community (CPS) or Programme régional océanien de l'environnement (PROE, Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme) founded by France (Bachelier, 2018). France participated for the first time as an observer in July 2019, together with other Asian countries, in the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting in Sri Lanka.

Secondly, in terms of security-defense.

France strengthens its military presence in the region and maintains the presence of the French Minister of Defence in the annual Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore. In addition to expanding cooperation with navies of Asian countries (in the field of counter-terrorism, natural disaster prevention, exchange of officers, exercises ...), France also proposes annual consultations on safety and freedom of navigation at sea in the Indo-Pacific region through international forums (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018; (Regaud, 2016b). Not only actively participating in regional security forums, strengthening defense cooperation and promoting weapons supply contracts, France also commits to pioneer at the front line and stand by Asian countries in combating terrorism, join hands and cooperate with regional partners to ensure security and stability in the region through combating drug and human trafficking, illegal fishing, piracy, terrorism and extreme threats.

Thirdly, in terms of economy, France clearly recognizes the necessity of mutual support between the French economy and the Asian economies in order to overcome the stagnation in France's economic relations with this region, at the same time, enhance Paris' overall trade influence in the region against the strong emergence of China in form of expanded relations, trade and investment in the region via APEC, G20 and new Free Trade Agreements to promote market opening, reduce trade barriers, enhance transparency and fulfill fair trade commitments. In spite of the increase by 3% in market share of France compared to that before the

realization of the Pivot policy, its market share only accounted for 13% of the total import turnover in Asia (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018). France has set a specific goal for the coming 10 years to strive to triple its market share in this region.

Fourthly, in terms of culture, France promotes the role of members of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie in Asia to enhance cultural exchange and human cooperation. This is also the point that is making a real mark in France's pivot to Asia. Never before has the French looked to Asia as much as they do today when the French communities in Asia were the fastest growing in the world. Currently, the number of French people living in Asia accounts for nearly 9% of the French people overseas. The number of French students at Asian universities is on the rise while the number of Asian students (especially those from China, Korea or Vietnam) currently studying in France reaches 50,000. Many Asian countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, are members of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie and become "bridges" to connect culture, language, education... between France and the ASEAN region in particular and Asia in general.

Vietnam is a country that suffers from a high-risk strategic environment with the great powers' contemplations, South China Sea disputes and asymmetric relations with neighboring China. On the other hand, Vietnam's available resources are at relatively low level. Therefore, the regional security strategy selected by Vietnam is a mixed one, including both normative and functional factors.

Firstly, coping with the major countries' strategic contemplations for the region, Vietnam insists on its "relation balance" policy. Vietnam gives the top priority to maintaining mutual trust and stability, promoting the highest possible cooperation and resolving disagreements according to international law (Markussen & Ngo, 2019). As a strategic partner which is mentioned in the "France's pivot to Asia" policy, Vietnam needs to work out appropriate guidelines in the context that France is realizing the policy. Promoting cooperation with major countries is often accompanied by force-gathering. In the situation of the rapidly increasing competition among major countries in the region, Vietnam needs to be very alert to avoid the choice between two ways. Good handling and balance of relations between major countries is the most important factor to promote cooperation and take advantage of the great opportunities brought by the French policy.

Following that, if the South China Sea dispute were viewed as one of Vietnam's most important security issues, Vietnam had also paid much attention to stabilizing its relationship with China as well as controlling the tension between itself and China. Vietnam has realized such efforts through its commitments on participation in exploration and development of resources together with other claims. In particular, Vietnam makes the most of multilateral means to resolve disputes at sea, such as seeking to include the South China Sea issue into the ASEAN agenda.

Conclusion

In the context where multilateralism faces a number of challenges from protectionism and nationalism of some major countries as well as increasing competition among major countries in Asia, Vietnam continue to insist on multilateralism and promote bilateral relations with its key strategic partners, such as France, to protect national interests, ensure territorial sovereignty security as well as development and influence of Vietnam. Vietnam's mixed regional security strategy demonstrates a combination of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in the spirit of independence, autonomy and balance of major-country relations. This strategy facilitates Vietnam's proactive adaption to the rapid and complex changes in the world and region, and establishment of its foothold in the world's order and the in-progress regional landscape.

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