



Vietnam's Strategic Role in Southeast Asia: Implications for Indonesia's Security and Regional Interests on Strengthening National Resilience

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Vietnam's strategic role in Southeast Asia and its implications for Indonesia's security and regional interests. The study contributes to the understanding of regional balance by analyzing Vietnam's deterrence strategies, economic resilience, and defense diplomacy. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected from strategic documents, regional security reports, and academic literature from 2020–2024. The concepts analyzed include strategic deterrence, economic diversification, and regional cooperation frameworks. Findings indicate that Vietnam's military modernization and multi-alignment diplomacy enhance its influence, offering valuable lessons for Indonesia. The study suggests that Vietnam's role reinforces ASEAN's collective strength and provides a model for navigating great power competition.

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam's prominence in the strategic and geopolitical dynamics of Southeast Asia has grown considerably over the past two decades. Geographically positioned along the western edge of the South China Sea, Vietnam occupies a critical location in one of the most contested maritime corridors in the world through which nearly one-third of global trade passes (Thuong & Oanh, 2021). This strategic placement not only situates Vietnam at the center of key regional developments but also subjects it to escalating maritime disputes, particularly with China. The growing relevance of Vietnam in regional affairs is not only attributed to its geographic location but also to its assertive foreign policy, military modernization, and expanding economic influence. For Indonesia another maritime power in the region—understanding Vietnam's trajectory is crucial for recalibrating national security strategies and enhancing regional cooperation.

The logical foundation for this research lies in the overlapping interests between Vietnam and Indonesia in safeguarding their sovereignty and promoting regional stability amid increasing geopolitical tensions. Both countries face external pressures, especially related to China's maritime claims in the South China Sea, and both rely heavily on secure sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for trade and economic development. Vietnam's robust approach to security, which includes strengthening maritime deterrence, forging strategic partnerships, and diversifying its economy, provides critical lessons for Indonesia. While Indonesia does not have overlapping claims with China, it remains concerned about incursions into its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) near the Natuna Islands. Thus, studying Vietnam's strategic posture offers a phenomenological entry point for understanding how small and medium powers in Southeast Asia can maintain strategic autonomy and regional relevance.

This research contributes to the enrichment of strategic studies by offering a comparative lens to examine how Vietnam's evolving role affects Indonesia's security environment and foreign policy considerations. The novelty of this paper lies in its comprehensive integration of Vietnam's defense, economic, and diplomatic policies as a model for Southeast Asian resilience in the face of great power rivalry. Existing studies have often examined Vietnam's deterrence strategy or economic growth in isolation. This paper, however, synthesizes multiple dimensions, military, economic, and diplomatic to provide a holistic picture of Vietnam's regional influence. Furthermore, the paper contextualizes this influence within the broader ASEAN framework, highlighting how Vietnam and Indonesia can collaboratively enhance regional security through shared strategic priorities.

Vietnam's defense posture has shifted from a historically inward-looking approach to one that increasingly leverages partnerships and modern military capabilities. This transformation includes significant procurement of submarines, maritime strike fighters, and anti-access capabilities aimed at countering Chinese assertiveness (Grossman, 2018; Shoji, 2016). Equally important is Vietnam's economic diversification strategy, which has reduced its dependence on China

through deepened engagement with trade agreements such as the CPTPP and RCEP. These economic measures not only enhance national resilience but also provide financial space for sustained defense spending and development (Seshadri, 2023). Vietnam's approach to balancing deterrence and diplomacy often characterized as "bamboo diplomacy" offers a nuanced strategy that blends flexibility with firmness (Dung, 2024).

This paper also seeks to address the gap in literature that specifically examines the bilateral implications of Vietnam's strategy on Indonesia. While ASEAN centrality has often been discussed as a multilateral theme, the unique geopolitical convergence of interests between Vietnam and Indonesia in the maritime domain presents a niche yet underexplored sample. As two of ASEAN's most populous nations with large coastlines and regional ambitions, the strategic alignment between the two can serve as a stabilizing force in Southeast Asia. This study, therefore, provides empirical and conceptual insights into how bilateral cooperation founded on shared threat perceptions and complementary capacities, can shape regional responses to security challenges.

In light of the above, the main objective of this study is to analyze how Vietnam's strategic developments across military, economic, and diplomatic domains impact Indonesia's security posture and regional interests. The study poses a guiding question: In what ways does Vietnam's strategic orientation inform and influence Indonesia's approach to regional security, particularly within the context of the South China Sea and broader Indo-Pacific tensions? Through this inquiry, the paper aims to contribute not only to theoretical enrichment but also to practical policy recommendations that support ASEAN cohesion and maritime security resilience.

By focusing on Vietnam as a case study, this research underscores the importance of adaptive, multidimensional strategies in navigating the complexities of regional geopolitics. It highlights the relevance of inter-state learning and collaborative defense postures, particularly for countries like Indonesia that must balance strategic autonomy with regional engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resource Mobilization Theory

Edwards and McCarthy (2004) reconceptualize Resource Mobilization Theory as a framework emphasizing the strategic role of resource acquisition, access, and deployment in collective action. Their work expands classic RMT by distinguishing types of resources, material, human, social-organizational, cultural, and moral. And also stresses the importance of both external support and internal structuring in mobilization success. Applied to state behavior, Vietnam's ability to mobilize financial investment, military capabilities, and international diplomatic leverage exemplifies how governments can function like social movements, organizing and deploying resources to maintain resilience and exert influence. This makes RMT applicable in analyzing how Vietnam sustains its strategic capacity within Southeast Asia.

Regional Security Complex Theory

Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory, first fully elaborated in *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), explains how states within a specific geographic region form interdependent security relationships due to proximity and shared threats. Southeast Asia, as a maritime region with strategic chokepoints and power rivalries, constitutes a classic regional security complex. Vietnam and Indonesia, while not direct rivals, are mutually influenced by regional developments especially China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. RSCT provides a framework to assess how Vietnam's strategic decisions reverberate across the region, compelling Indonesia to adapt its defense posture within ASEAN's collective context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design based on Creswell's interpretive framework, which seeks to understand complex social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved (Creswell, 2013). Data were collected through document analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and strategic themes. This approach allows for contextualized interpretation of Vietnam's strategic behavior and its implications for Indonesia's security within the Southeast Asian regional security complex.

RESEARCH RESULT

Vietnam's deterrence posture, marked by its acquisition of Kilo-class submarines, Su-30MK2 fighters, and coastal missile systems, reflects an asymmetrical defense strategy aimed at countering China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. This supports the logic of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), where regional security concerns drive interconnected defense postures, influencing Indonesia to consider similar maritime modernization. In other perspective Vietnam's economic resilience, achieved through participation in CPTPP and RCEP, exemplifies strategic resource diversification. This aligns with Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), highlighting how states enhance strategic autonomy by mobilizing economic assets. Indonesia may draw from this approach to mitigate overdependence on dominant powers.

Vietnam's multilateral diplomacy, seen in strategic alignments with the United States, Japan, India, and Russia demonstrates its capacity to leverage external partnerships as a security asset. This reflects both RSCT's emphasis on regional interdependence and RMT's view of alliance-building as a mobilizable organizational resource, reinforcing Vietnam's influence while pressuring Indonesia to adapt its foreign policy calculus within ASEAN and beyond.

These patterns underscore Vietnam's transformation into a multidimensional strategic actor in Southeast Asia. Rather than relying solely on military buildup, Vietnam combines internal capacity-building with external balancing strategies. Its assertive stance in maritime disputes, proactive economic diplomacy, and consistent engagement in multilateral forums signal a deliberate attempt to project stability and deter coercion. For Indonesia, Vietnam's behavior offers a benchmark for navigating similar challenges in the

region, particularly regarding China's maritime claims. The convergence of interests in defending sovereignty, upholding international law, and reinforcing ASEAN unity further highlights Vietnam's relevance as a strategic counterpart and security influencer in Indonesia's regional calculus. These findings confirm that Vietnam's integrated mobilization of military, economic, and diplomatic resources significantly shapes the regional security architecture and contributes to Indonesia's evolving strategic considerations.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that Vietnam's growing strategic capacity plays a significant role in shaping the evolving regional security architecture in Southeast Asia. Through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), Vietnam and Indonesia are positioned within the same regional framework, where security interdependence means the strategic behavior of one state inevitably affects the other (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Vietnam's assertive military deterrence particularly in response to China's maritime expansionism has escalated regional dynamics that Indonesia cannot ignore, especially given the proximity of the Natuna Islands to contested waters. As noted by Hiswi (2020), Vietnam's military modernization, including its acquisition of Kilo-class submarines and maritime strike capabilities, has established a credible deterrent force that alters the strategic calculus in the South China Sea. Vietnam's posture also reflects a sophisticated application of asymmetric defense, whereby a smaller state leverages targeted capabilities to resist a more dominant power. This strategy is reinforced by Vietnam's use of land reclamation and island defense in the Spratly Islands (Kościelniak, 2023), mirroring China's own methods. Such actions raise expectations for Indonesia to bolster its own maritime security through similarly cost-effective but impactful measures, such as enhancing naval patrols and increasing regional defense exercises.

From the perspective of Resource Mobilization Theory (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004), Vietnam exemplifies how a state can strategically mobilize its internal and external resources to expand influence. Economically, its diversification through trade frameworks like CPTPP and RCEP reduces vulnerability to economic coercion from China (Seshadri, 2023; Lu, 2018). The influx of foreign direct investment (Quang et al., 2022) and transformation into a global manufacturing hub (Hung, 2022) also enhances Vietnam's national resilience. This form of economic empowerment not only funds military modernization but also legitimizes Vietnam's position in international negotiations. Indonesia, observing these developments, may consider adopting a similar strategy to enhance its strategic autonomy and reduce dependency on major powers, particularly in times of rising geopolitical tension.

Diplomatically, Vietnam's partnerships with the United States, India, and Japan demonstrate the strategic value of multilateral alignment. As Shoji (2016) and Tuan & Thuy (2016) observe, these partnerships are framed as cooperative, yet clearly signal Vietnam's intention to balance China's influence. Vietnam's commitment to a rules-based international order, as reflected in its adherence to UNCLOS despite China's defiance (Borte & Victoria, 2023), reinforces its

international credibility and highlights the soft power value of legal legitimacy in regional disputes. For Indonesia, Vietnam's diplomacy provides a roadmap for maintaining strategic flexibility while reinforcing ASEAN centrality. As Ngoc Giap (2023) notes, the cooperative emphasis between Indonesia and Vietnam in maritime delimitation reflects a shared commitment to peaceful resolution and regional stability. This strategic alignment, if deepened, could enhance ASEAN's collective resilience in facing great power rivalry. The findings of this study confirm that Vietnam's growing strategic capacity plays a significant role in shaping the evolving regional security architecture in Southeast Asia.

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The strategic transformation of Vietnam into a proactive regional actor also has internal implications for ASEAN cohesion. While Vietnam aligns with many ASEAN norms, its growing strategic confidence and bilateral partnerships with major powers could generate pressure on the bloc's traditional principle of non-alignment. For Indonesia, which often champions ASEAN centrality, Vietnam's dual-track strategy regional alignment and global hedging poses both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, it reinforces ASEAN's collective relevance in dealing with great power rivalry. On the other, it may compel Indonesia to reevaluate its traditionally neutral posture in favor of more assertive, interest-based diplomacy.

Furthermore, Vietnam's ability to integrate economic performance with strategic ambition illustrates the growing connection between development policy and defense planning. As McCaig et al. (2022) show, Vietnam's export-led growth model has not only increased national income but also improved its bargaining position in global forums. This convergence of economics and geopolitics is increasingly evident across Southeast Asia, and Indonesia despite its larger population and geographic scale has yet to fully synchronize these domains. Vietnam's model suggests that strategic resilience is not merely about defense spending, but about embedding security goals into national development strategies, trade policy, and international engagement.

In this regard, Vietnam's behavior can no longer be viewed as reactive or constrained by history. Rather, it is strategic, forward-looking, and adaptable. For Indonesia, this presents both a mirror and a motivator—to recognize that comprehensive security requires not only guarding borders but also mobilizing society, markets, and diplomacy toward a clearly articulated national interest within a complex regional system.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Vietnam's evolving strategic posture demonstrates a successful integration of military deterrence, economic resilience, and diplomatic alignment positioning the country as a pivotal actor in Southeast Asia's regional security complex. Through deliberate resource mobilization and strategic engagement, Vietnam has adapted to the challenges of great power competition, particularly in response to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea (Daojiong & Gong, 2021; Kościelniak, 2023). The study's findings supported by the frameworks of Resource Mobilization Theory (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004) and Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) highlight that Vietnam's strategic behavior directly influences the security calculations of neighboring states, including Indonesia.

For Indonesia, Vietnam's approach offers a practical reference on how a medium power can expand its influence by linking internal capability with external alignment. Vietnam's asymmetric defense measures, such as submarine acquisition and anti-access strategies, have effectively strengthened deterrence without triggering an arms race (Hiswi, 2020; Grossman, 2018). Simultaneously, Vietnam's proactive economic diplomacy through participation in CPTPP and RCEP, show sign that it has reduced reliance on Chinese markets and enhanced strategic autonomy (Seshadri, 2023; Lu, 2018).

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations emerge. First, Indonesia should enhance its maritime defense capabilities, especially in contested areas like the Natuna Sea, through technological investment and regional cooperation. Second, Indonesia must further align economic policy with national security by diversifying trade and investing in strategic sectors, as Vietnam has successfully done (Hung, 2022; Quang et al., 2022). Third, Indonesia should strengthen strategic partnerships while reinforcing its role in ASEAN to maintain regional cohesion in the face of external pressures.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research should explore comparative case studies between Vietnam and other ASEAN countries to assess varying responses to China's regional strategy. Quantitative modeling of resource mobilization effectiveness in defense outcomes could enhance theoretical precision. Additionally, investigating Indonesia's internal bureaucratic coordination in translating strategic insights into policy particularly in maritime security would offer valuable perspectives on implementation challenges. Expanding the scope to include cyber and space security could also reflect emerging domains of strategic competition in Southeast Asia.

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