

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Vietnamese Foreign Policy in the Post-Doi Moi Era: A Case for Strategic Autonomy

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Abstract

Vietnam's foreign policy – centred on multilateralisation, diversification, and international integration – has transformed the country's economic fortunes and elevated its international standing. Throughout the Doi Moi era, Vietnam has cultivated a strong network of bilateral and multilateral frameworks to further its economic aspirations and protect its national sovereignty. It has leveraged astute diplomacy to navigate challenges and seize opportunities. Since the Thirteenth National Party Congress, which set a goal for Vietnam to become a developed nation by 2045, these challenges have become increasingly pronounced. Protectionism, great-power politics, an undermining of the rules-based order, ever-present tensions in the South China Sea, as well as pandemic- and war-related disruptions to supply chains, have complicated Vietnam's quest for national security and its effort to ensure peace and stability in pursuit of its economic targets. Amidst such a fraught environment, strategic autonomy has become a buzzword among smaller states that seek to maintain the benefits of interdependence while actively alleviating the risks associated with heightened geopolitical tensions and dependent relationships. Scholars of Vietnamese foreign policy likewise argue that Vietnam's foreign policy seeks to bolster its strategic autonomy. However, little effort has been made to clarify what exactly this entails. The present study defines the concept in the Vietnamese context by asking, "Where and how does Vietnam seek to strengthen its strategic autonomy?" It argues that Vietnam's pursuit rests on three core components, which it examines through Vietnam's responses to US–China rivalry, the Russia–Ukraine war, and the country's evolving approach to infrastructure development, energy security, and foreign direct investment.

Keywords: Vietnamese Foreign Policy; Strategic Autonomy; FDI; Infrastructure

Introduction

Vietnamese politics was uncharacteristically turbulent in 2024. Long-standing leader of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), Nguyen Phu Trong, succumbed to illness in July, replaced by To Lam, who became both General Secretary and President. The latter role he relinquished to Luong Cuong in October, marking the fourth shift in the presidency that year. National Assembly Chairman Vuong Dinh Hue resigned, with CPV Executive Secretary Truong Thi Mai following shortly thereafter. The global landscape faced comparable instability. The rivalry between the US and China was ever-present; the Russia–Ukraine war entered its second year with little end in sight; closer to home, hostilities continued in the South China Sea, and in Myanmar, a deepening crisis was unfolding. The Thirteenth National Party Congress, which spelt out ambitious economic development targets, foreshadowed such events, noting that global and regional landscapes are subject to complex developments that present challenges and opportunities. How Vietnam deals with these challenges and

opportunities, the congress noted, is intertwined with Vietnam's development trajectory (Tap Chi Cong San 2021).

Yet, Vietnam has been widely praised for its ability to deal with such challenges, turning “a zero-sum game among greater powers into a positive-sum game” (Khang Vu 2024). One of Trong's last acts as leader was to welcome Vladimir Putin to Vietnam in June 2024, making Vietnam the only country to host leaders of the US, China, and Russia within the space of twelve months, despite tensions between these superpowers being unprecedentedly high. Vietnamese foreign policy watchers increasingly note that Vietnam's foreign policy of multilateralization and diversification serves to bolster its strategic autonomy (Hoang Thi Ha 2024: 40; Le Hong Hiep 2020b: 31; Phan 2022: 179; Thayer 2025: 7). Even the CPV's own theoretical journal has dedicated attention to strategic autonomy. Nghiem and Vu (2024) state that to ensure “strategic autonomy in the new context,” Vietnam must develop a theory that considers new conditions. Similarly, from Turkey to South Korea, a host of smaller powers are anchoring their foreign policy to this seemingly broad concept. The international system, dominated by protectionism, multipolarity, complex interdependence, and conflict, incentivises actors to pursue strategic autonomy (Hoang *et al.* 2024). Against this background, the following research question was posed: how do we operationalise the concept of strategic autonomy within the Vietnamese context, and where can it be empirically observed?

This study first elucidates strategic autonomy against the backdrop of a complicated international arena, arguing that Vietnam seeks to strengthen its strategic autonomy vis-à-vis three mechanisms: managing strategic dependencies, pursuing alternatives to dependencies, and strengthening its domestic capabilities to become more resilient against asymmetries while improving its capacity to act independently when necessary. It then explores the term's utility in bridging various interpretations of Vietnamese foreign policy, thereby offering a new framework in response to today's unpredictable geopolitical climate. From there, the study empirically examines this phenomenon at the structural and domestic levels, attesting to the concept's ability to straddle the international and domestic spheres, and reflecting Vietnam's overall commitment to safeguarding national independence, expanding international integration, and creating an environment conducive to its economic development targets. It explores how Vietnam utilises the aforementioned mechanisms to navigate the US–China rivalry, the Russia–Ukraine War, as well as how this navigation unfolds through Vietnam's infrastructure aspirations, energy security, and recalibration of its dependency on FDI.

Conceptualising Strategic Autonomy for Vietnam

The search for autonomy in international relations is not novel. Fox (1959) paid considerable attention to the ability of small states to avoid pressures from great powers during WWII. According to Waltz (1979), the pursuit of autonomy is simply the preservation of sovereignty in an anarchic structural system. Hobson (2000: 24) presents autonomy as the ability to pursue domestic and international policies free of as many external influences and constraints as possible. Other scholars echo that autonomy denotes “(the) maximum capacity of choice that one can have, taking into account world constraints” (Pinheiro and Lima 2018: 4). Yet the number of choices and complexity of constraints have risen in the aftermath of the Cold War with the emergence of a multipolar system. The pursuit of autonomy no longer aligns with what Puig (1984) once described as “heterodox autonomy,” or the avoidance of dependence. Globalisation, free trade, global governance, technological interdependence, and regional integration have together produced a more diffused and intertwined power system, one in which middle powers have become more affluent and influential (Harknett and Yalcin 2012). The boom in trade has seen the traditional “handicaps of smallness diminish” (Long 2017: 11). Yet much of the predictability and rules that underpinned this rise in stature have begun to erode as great power politics, protectionism, and unilateralism proliferate, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China, Trump 2.0, and widening schisms even among seemingly like-minded actors all attest to

the precarious nature of today's international system, which countries such as Vietnam must carefully navigate.

The intertwined nature of global trade has added layers of complexity to this situation. Global trade can undermine economic growth by exposing states, small and large alike, to greater risks of supply chain disruption, as many experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. For smaller states, this has often heightened existing asymmetries and raised the risk of “leveraged interdependence,” whereby states place unwelcome pressure on those lower down the power spectrum to fulfil their own geostrategic goals (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022: 5). Similarly, these asymmetries can be experienced across multiple, sometimes competing areas (Trinh Nguyen-Vo 2024: 21; Womack 2016: 154). The rise in power politics means that asymmetries must be navigated vis-à-vis great powers, whilst interdependence means that asymmetries in one area may not be as prominent in another.

Simultaneously, the multipolar and multilateralism system has generated greater alternatives to traditionally Western-dominated institutions like the World Bank and IMF. Initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, the New Development Bank, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation afford smaller states greater flexibility and control over their economic destinies. Chinese and Russian power, along with interdependence, grants states “new pathways of leverage” (Cooley and Nexon 2013: 1041). In short, smaller states face greater challenges but also more opportunities – underscoring calls for a change in perspective when studying their foreign policy decisions and outcomes (Long 2017: 3).

Given these challenges, states are increasingly choosing to frame their foreign policy using the concept of “strategic autonomy.” Perhaps the most concrete example is seen in the EU, where the term featured extensively in its 2016 Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy. However, other countries have similarly adopted this concept. India, for example, strives to enhance its strategic autonomy by eschewing alliances, power politics, and hegemonic influence. New Delhi's goal is to “maximise the nation's autonomy in making decisions while operating within the parameters of an interdependent international system” (Vinodan and Kurian 2024: 6). The UAE, meanwhile, has sought to bolster regional cooperation, prioritise participation in regional and global forums, support initiatives that try to create alternatives to a Western-led order, and reach out to countries of similar stature to cultivate greater economic ties and like-minded consensus. It has also embarked on a stringent military modernisation program (Malhotra and Fourol 2023: 18).

Under President Yoon Suk Yeol, South Korea embraced a policy of strategic autonomy. Seoul has expanded its economic diplomacy with middle and lower economies, demonstrated greater responsibility in multilateral forums, and emphasised its commitment to an international rules-based order to elevate its international standing and assert itself as a middle power (Pham Thi Yen 2023: 483). Doing this requires navigating multiple asymmetries, namely China and the US. It relies on China to fuel economic growth and on the US for reinforcing its security. Blowback from China over the decision to install the THAAD missile system, combined with Trump's insistence that South Korea pay more for US security guarantees, highlighted the precariousness of relying on the support of two major powers (Borowiec 2023). Meanwhile, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has reoriented Turkey's foreign policy, from one striving for greater interdependence to one marked by an “assertive quest for autonomy” (Kutlay and Öniş 2021: 1087). This approach constitutes Ankara maximising the capacity to make decisions while taking into account real-world constraints.

With the growing prominence of strategic autonomy, scholars are paying greater attention to this contested concept. Strategic autonomy serves what Beaucillon (2023: 417) calls “double political objectives,” ensuring an organisation has the capacity to act alone in accordance with its policy choices, whilst simultaneously being able to shape international relations through that action. Some proclaim that strategic autonomy translates into the ability to establish and adjust the rules of the game instead of passively complying with them, highlighting strategic autonomy's active, rather than passive, descriptive power (Lippert *et al.* 2019: 5). Helwig and Sinkkonen (2022: 2-3) emphasise interdependence management, arguing that strategic autonomy comprises the “political, institutional, and

material ability for the EU and its member states to manage their interdependence with third parties.” Others highlight the centrality of strategic interests, outlining that strategic autonomy refers to a state’s ability to make globally significant choices independently, through leadership and engagement centred on its strategic interests and values (Alcidi *et al.* 2023: 17). Others emphasise a holistic account of strategic autonomy, illuminating the intricate, at times overlapping, connections between domestic politics and foreign policy (Zandee *et al.* 2020: 1).

Interpretations of strategic autonomy reveal the disconnect between empirical analysis and theoretical engagement beyond the EU. Although states are increasingly adopting the term, little effort has been made to contextualise it outside the European context. As a result, theoretical discussions remain largely EU-centric and, therefore, limited in scope. Still, such interpretations remain useful. They show that strategic autonomy does not equate to autarchy, protectionism, or self-reliance. Much of the theoretical framing stems from the “altered dynamics” of the international system, one that Vietnam must also navigate (Alcidi *et al.* 2023: 4). Vietnam needs to strategically manage its asymmetries and dependencies, and the framework’s multifaceted nature provides a useful lens for connecting domestic considerations with foreign policy choices.

This study harnesses the theoretical interpretations to ascertain components of Vietnam’s pursuit of strategic autonomy and bridge these with empirical observations. In doing so, it addresses the question of how and when Vietnam creates greater strategic autonomy, creates a working definition for the concept within the Vietnamese context, and operationalises it. For Vietnam, strategic autonomy is the ability to manage multiple asymmetrical relations through deepened engagement and diversification while cultivating enhanced resilience and a greater capacity to act independently when deemed strategically necessary. Crucially, this definition distinguishes between dependency and overreliance. For Vietnam, dependency is an inevitable part of its international integration efforts, yet managing risk interwoven with dependency requires mitigation vis-à-vis external and internal actions. Dependency is a spectrum, not binary.

As Figure 1 shows, strategic autonomy is enhanced via three mechanisms, which can be both externally and internally oriented. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive; they reinforce one another, and an optimal strategy entails employing all three. The first involves leaning into existing dependencies that are deemed strategic, or that greatly advance Vietnam’s security and domestic interests. As long as over-reliance is averted, such dependencies will not be eschewed. The second involves seeking alternative avenues to either reduce over-reliance or cultivate greater resilience against leveraged interdependence. Lastly, Vietnam strengthens its domestic capabilities to reinforce its capacity to act independently or assert greater control over external forces to shape them in line with Vietnam’s national interests. These efforts can include generating greater means of domestic sources of production for strategic industries, e.g., energy, state-targeted interventions to facilitate the growth of nascent domestic industries, or even domestic reforms to strengthen the state’s capacity to influence external forces deemed necessary for its national interests.

Literature on Vietnamese Foreign Policy

Vietnam’s multidirectional foreign policy originates from Resolution Thirteen, introduced in 1988. This resolution marked a major reversal in Vietnam’s previously dogmatic, polarised view of the international system. The policy strove to cultivate more friends and fewer enemies (thêm bạn bớt thù). By and large, every National Party Congress since has reaffirmed its commitment to diversification and multilateralisation (đa dạng hóa, đa phương hóa), with multidirectionality growing in scope and depth (Chapman 2017). Notable developments include an emphasis on international integration in 2001 and the 2016 National Party Congress’ elevation of multilateralism. Likewise, Resolution Eight, passed in July 2003, introduced the concept of cooperation (đối tác) and struggle (đối tượng) (Thayer 2016: 210), rejecting the binary labels of friend and foe. Instead, it determines that Vietnam can cooperate with a state in areas that align with Vietnam’s national interests,

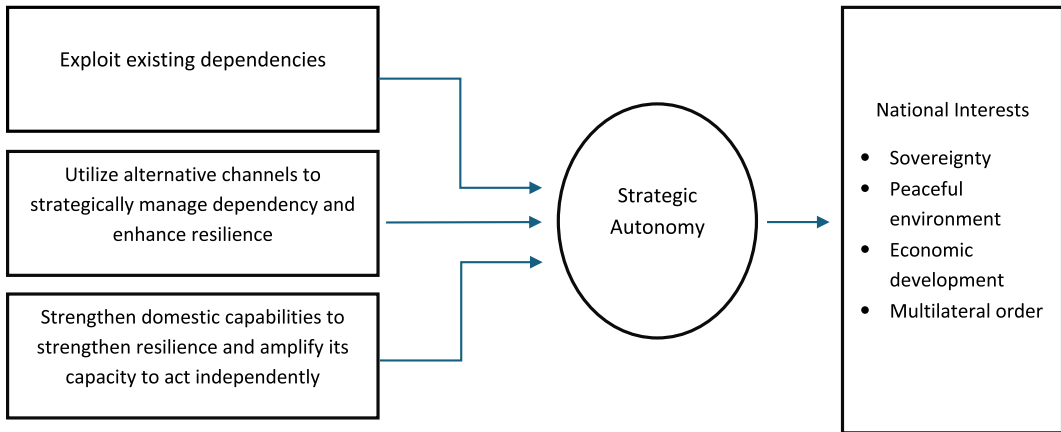


Figure 1. Vietnam's framework for enhancing strategic autonomy.

but simultaneously struggle against that state when its actions compromise Vietnam's national interests.

Recent literature on Vietnamese foreign policy reveals three prominent trends. First, the growth of complex interdependence has led to a rise in 'hedging' as a prominent framework for interpreting Vietnamese posturing (Dar 2021; Le Hong Hiep 2013). Hedging, the so-called third way, has been touted as a suitable alternative to the balancing–bandwagoning hegemony that dominated theoretical debates about international relations throughout the Cold War. It also accounts for the high degree of economic interdependence prevalent in the modern political economy (Chan 2020). It is “an insurance policy against opportunism” (Lake 1996: 15). Many proclaim that hedging best encapsulates Southeast Asian countries' approach towards China (Jones and Jenne 2021: 209; Le Hong Hiep 2013: 333; Liao and Dang 2020: 671; Haacke 2019: 377).

Still, the current literature does not sufficiently explain the concept of hedging (Koga 2018: 637). The lack of consensus surrounding its meaning reduces its analytical utility and results in varying interpretations. Goh (2005: 2), for example, argues that hedging comprises a “set of strategies aimed at avoiding a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality.” Meanwhile, Luo (2025: 660) describes hedging as offering states the ability to engage with rising powers, navigate the China–US rivalry, negate economic and strategic vulnerabilities, or a mixture of all three. Both interpretations, however, fail to accommodate the rising capabilities and diversity of choices that states enjoy in the wake of deepened economic integration. Hedging emphasises passive approaches and serves as a tactical strategy, not a broad method for analysing foreign policy decisions.

Secondly, studies of Vietnamese foreign policy need to account for domestic considerations. Previous explanations have been criticised for being realist-centric, focusing primarily on security concerns and eschewing domestic considerations (Le 2016; Nguyen Thanh Trung and Truong-Minh Vu 2018). Dang and Nguyen (2023: 92) argue that Vietnam's foreign policy is an extension of domestic politics and that it is shaped by the realisation of domestic goals. Consequently, greater attention has been paid to the domestic considerations pertinent to Vietnamese decision-making at the international level. Minh Phuong Vu (2024), for example, employed an agent-centred historical approach to explore a shift in Vietnamese foreign policy after the 2014 Haiyang Shiyu 981 oil rig standoff, asserting that a “weakening in conservative forces” and the rise of nationalists led to Vietnam's more combative stance towards China, as well as to indirect balancing with Washington. Harnessing Robert Putnam's two-level game analysis, Vu Thi Thu Ngan and Le Dinh Tinh (2023) explained that Hanoi's proactiveness in recent years reflects a dual-track approach; ensuring its national interests are shielded

from a more assertive China whilst creating an environment conducive to its goal to become a developed nation with high income levels by 2045. Similarly, others have outlined that the CPV's domestic win-set relies on placating domestic and international economic interest groups – ensuring political stability to spur economic growth, safeguarding security and territorial integrity, and fostering political stability at home (Vo Minh Hung *et al.* 2025: 14–5).

Lastly, the literature on Vietnamese foreign policy points to what Huong Le Thu calls “inconsistencies” (2018: 132–134), which form a persistent foreign policy dilemma. Self-reliance, she notes, contradicts economic integration. Other opposing themes present in Vietnamese policy are consistent in principle and flexible in tactics: adherence to Marxism–Leninism whilst pursuing free market reforms and touting human rights at the international level despite repressing them internally. Similarly, Tuong Vu (2016: 280–281) makes note of the “schizophrenia” of Vietnamese ideological constructs. Others have also navigated the complexity inherent in current Vietnamese foreign policy doctrine. For example, Vu (2024: 399) argues that Resolution Eight does not constitute a “complete removal of ideological concerns.” Rather, party interests occupy the main consideration in foreign policymaking. Whether this is the case is beyond the scope of this study; however, it demonstrates the need to bridge contrasting interpretations of Vietnamese foreign policy.

These three variations in the literature produce three challenges when presenting a framework for Vietnamese foreign policy: the need for an alternative explanation to hedging, the need to give greater weight to domestic factors, and the need to bridge specific ideological constructs. These trends partly explain why some are calling for a new worldview to guide Vietnam's actions in the current context (Vuving 2023: 364). As Thuy T. Do (2022: 295–296) likewise denotes, fresh outlooks are needed to fill the post-Cold War “ideological void.”

Strategic autonomy helps resolve this conundrum. It accounts for the increasing salience of smaller countries in the international system, as well as the complexities and asymmetries they must navigate. Its hybrid nature allows domestic elements to be incorporated into the analysis. While security remains a primary concern for Vietnamese foreign policymakers, national development is equally important. This domestic economic component cannot be separated from analyses of Vietnamese foreign policy outcomes.

Furthermore, strategic autonomy's versatility means that ideological tensions can coexist with pragmatism, because behaviour is framed as contributing to strategic autonomy. Self-reliance is compatible with and complementary to economic integration. Ultimately, strategic autonomy serves as a useful framework for understanding how Vietnam's foreign policy operates in an era of enhanced complexity yet increasing opportunity.

Enhancing Strategic Autonomy Despite Structural Challenges

The next two sections examine Vietnamese diplomatic positioning since the Thirteenth National Party Congress in the wake of enhanced complications at the structural level, and how this posturing works to strengthen Vietnam's strategic autonomy, which in turn bolsters its security and economic development. Vietnam's diplomacy remains rooted in protecting its national interests, yet flexible in responding to challenges that pressure it. Since the Thirteenth National Party Congress, these pressures include the growing strategic rivalry between the US and China, the ever-present territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and Russia's War with Ukraine, not to mention Trump's return to the White House. In charting Vietnam's responses to these events, three elements of strategic autonomy are observed. Vietnam leverages strategic dependencies for security and economic benefits, whilst simultaneously exploring alternative sources of reinforcement, both at the international and domestic levels.

US–China Rivalry

Rising US–China tensions form the “largest geopolitical vortex in Vietnam's international environment” (Vuving 2023: 364). Many discussions of how Vietnam navigates the US–China nexus

interpret its approach as hedging (Phan 2024: 647; Le Hong Hiep 2020b: 31; Wu and Velasco 2024). Vietnam counters Chinese security threats by welcoming a greater US presence in the region, whilst seeking to stave off the threat of “peaceful evolution” (Viet and Dieu 2024: 121). However, the situation is more nuanced than this. Vietnam avoids any form of balancing against China because its security depends on it. Its socialist-oriented model also shares no “parallels except China” (Nguyen Khac Giang 2022). It has tried balancing in the past, notably in its alignment with the Soviet Union, which accompanied international isolation and a lack of economic development following the Vietnam War (Khang Vu 2025: 827–828).

This strategy is particularly evident in Vietnam’s evolving relationship with both the US and China. Since the US and Vietnam normalised relations in 1995, relations have been on an upward trajectory, a trend that has accelerated since Trong became the first CPV Secretary to visit the US in 2015. The US lifted its arms embargo in 2016, clearing the “last obstacle” to the formation of a strategic partnership (Vuving 2023: 362). US President Donald Trump visited Hanoi twice, and a memorandum of understanding on a comprehensive energy partnership was signed in 2019. Two-way trade between the two rose from USD 54.6 billion in 2017 to USD 138.0 billion in 2022¹. This convergence of interests sparked calls to upgrade the 2013 Comprehensive Partnership between the two countries.

In 2019, rumours circulated that such upgrades would be discussed between the two nations. Yet Vietnamese foreign policy watchers also noted that Hanoi was keeping a “low profile” to avoid irking its northern neighbour (Le Hong Hiep 2020a: 15). The Vietnamese media remained silent on any such suggestions, and Vietnam quietly cancelled fifteen defence engagement activities with the US. Around the same time, tensions escalated in the South China Sea. In the summer of 2019, a stand-off between Chinese and Vietnamese forces occurred at Vanguard Bank, followed by a Chinese research vessel entering waters near where a Vietnamese and Russian partnership entity was conducting research. This venture was later suspended, and Vietnam was forced to pay USD 1 billion in compensation to Spanish energy company Respol and Mubadala Investment Company – owned by the United Arab Emirates – for cancelling contracts (Hayton 2020). The cancellations allegedly stemmed from political pressure from Beijing, indicating that Vietnam’s autonomy remained constrained.

Yet, following the Thirteenth National Party Congress, Vietnam has rejected the policy of treading lightly. US President Joe Biden and Nguyen Phu Trong inked a comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP) upon Biden’s visit in 2023, even leapfrogging a strategic partnership, placing the US on a par with China, Russia, and India. This partnership was established despite analysts dubbing the upgrading of ties “unrealistic” due to possible retaliation from China (Guarascio 2023). The agreement expanded defensive ties to stronger naval cooperation, maritime security, and law enforcement in the South China Sea. Additionally, it moved away from general cooperation in technology and education to facilitate a key focus on semiconductors, AI, and renewable energy – a move that is likely to augment Hanoi’s transition towards a high-tech and semiconductor hub and generate greater energy security (Mai *et al.* 2024).

The response by Chinese news outlets was muted, dismissing it as a “symbolic gesture” (Chen and Ma 2023). This reflected a broader sense of acceptance towards strengthened Vietnam–US ties. After the American aircraft carrier USS Roosevelt visited Vietnam in 2020, Chinese media noted that “closer military relations between the US and Vietnam would not alter cooperation between Beijing and Hanoi” (Li 2020). Viewed in isolation, closer collaboration with Washington lends credence to the argument that Hanoi seeks Washington as a counterweight to Beijing. It also suggests that alleged Chinese attempts to limit interaction with the US are failing. I argue here, however, against such a binary approach. Hanoi simultaneously cultivates ties with both in a form of strategic dependency management, thereby reinforcing the status quo. Increasing US involvement was not achieved simply via greater tolerance from Beijing or by working around the limitations that China allegedly sets on

¹<https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5520.html>

Vietnam's engagement with the US (Hayton 2023: 389). The recent visit of the USS Ronald Reagan in June 2023, for example, coincided with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh's four-day official visit to China (Thayer 2025: 5). Hanoi's growing partnership with Washington is unfolding in parallel with Vietnam's proactive efforts to restore and expand relations with Beijing after nearly a decade of mistrust.

The Hai Yang Shi You 981 standoff in 2014 sparked the biggest crisis in Vietnam–China relations for decades and was a seminal moment in eroding Vietnamese trust towards China (Vuving 2023: 361). The following intermediate years culminated in stalled engagement. For example, Xi Jinping's 2017 state visit to Hanoi – held during the APEC summit in Da Nang – produced little substantive progress since the 2014 standoff (Le Hong Hiep 2017). Yet, following the Thirteenth National Party Congress, high-profile visits have increased in both frequency and impact. Despite the disruptions to international travel in the wake of COVID-19, Nguyen Phu Trong travelled to Beijing in 2022, where a thirteen-point statement centred on deepening political and economic cooperation was issued. Xi met with Trong again in October 2023 on the side of the Belt and Road Forum, stating that under changing international landscapes, the two should deepen their traditional friendship (The Asahi Shimbun 2023). Likewise, three months after the announcement of the Vietnam–US CSP, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Vietnam for the first time in over six years. Vietnam signed onto Beijing's "community of common destiny" (Nguyen Khac Giang 2023). The visit also saw leaders agree to promote defence industry cooperation, something that was reiterated in August 2024 (Thayer 2025: 28). Vietnam has not procured military weapons from China since the Vietnam War, and while defence cooperation is likely to be extremely limited in scope, its potential signals Hanoi's multifaceted approach. President Xi also visited Southeast Asia after Trump announced his "freedom day tariffs," establishing 45 bilateral agreements with Vietnam over a number of areas, including defence–security cooperation, reaffirming the possibility of limited arms procurement from Beijing. It also included collaboration on connectivity, artificial intelligence, human resource development, and aviation cooperation (Guarascio *et al.* 2025). Overall, these developments reflect a growing confidence in Hanoi to deepen its partnership with Beijing, despite a high degree of economic dependence and security fears.

Vietnam is not eschewing dependency but rather strategically expanding it. The ability to do so, however, is further strengthened by engaging with alternative channels. Equally important as deepened engagement with China and the US is the broader context under which such engagement occurred. Nguyen Hung Son (2023) states, "Vietnam's ultimate purpose for the upgrade of diplomatic ties with partners across the board, including with the US, is to stiffen its network of relationships, and to enhance its resilience and strength in a world of growing uncertainty. That need for resilience is not in response to any particular threat, any particular source, or any particular country." Sandwiched between the US CSP were the same upgrades with regional partners – South Korea and Japan. Vietnam likewise inked CSPs with Australia, France, and Malaysia in 2024, and New Zealand, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and the United Kingdom in 2025. Vietnam now has CSPs with fourteen countries. The highest echelon of its international partnerships is no longer exclusive to larger powers.

Alternative sources reinforce Vietnam's ability to manage asymmetries and strengthen its overall strategic autonomy. Vietnam established a free trade agreement with the European Union in 2020, leading to a spike in exports to the EU. Between 2020 and 2022, exports rose by 33%, and as of 2024, it enjoyed a EUR 35 billion surplus, with investment flows of over 10 billion euros (European Union. 2025: 3). Vietnam is also a founding member of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, which has helped improve Vietnam's digital economy infrastructure and expand the online presence of its domestic industries in other countries (Thanh Quang Ngo 2023: 92–93).

Vietnam and Japan have seen enhanced convergence on security. In August 2024, Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara and Vietnamese Defense Minister Phan Van Giang reaffirmed commitments to deepen bilateral defence engagement, including Japan's transfer of search and rescue vehicles under

a 2021 defence equipment and technology transfer agreement. Two Ground Self-Defense Force carriers were subsequently delivered to Hanoi in December 2024 (Nihon Keizai Shimbun 2024). Both countries emphasise peaceful dispute resolution under international law, while also coordinating within ASEAN and broader Indo-Pacific frameworks to counter Beijing's maritime assertiveness.

Vietnam's security outreach has not been limited to Japan. The Philippines' Ferdinand Marcos Jr signed a memorandum of understanding on security after visiting Vietnam in January 2024, emphasising that "maritime cooperation between his country and Vietnam would be one of the cornerstones forged in a strategic partnership" (Flores and Lema 2024). Thereafter, the first-ever joint coast guard exercise was conducted in August, almost two months after Chinese forces used motorboats, spears, and machetes to damage and injure Filipino ships and navy personnel (The Asahi Shimbun 2024). However, deepened security engagement has not come at the expense of cooperation with Beijing. Though under-reported at the time of Vietnam's joint patrols with the Philippines, a Vietnamese vessel simultaneously paid a friendly visit to China (Liu and Guo 2024). Maritime cooperation with Beijing, as with all regional partners, sits firmly within Hanoi's national interests. Chinese naval ships regularly pay port calls in Vietnam and vice versa. In addition, Hanoi and Beijing have performed joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin twice a year since 2006, with quarterly patrols starting in 2024 (Vietnam Plus 2024).

Vietnam also launched diplomatic initiatives with regional partners, including the Coast Guard Exchange Program in 2022, bringing together China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, as well as representatives from the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The program was carried out next in December 2024 (People's Army Newspaper 2024).

Efforts to safeguard sovereignty have extended beyond diplomacy, particularly to the third element of strategic autonomy, i.e., strengthening internal mechanisms. Beginning around 2017, Vietnam quietly ramped up its expansion of outposts in the South China Sea. These efforts were accelerated in 2024. The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (2024) proclaimed 2024 to be a record year for Vietnam's island building, increasing from 329 acres to 2,360 acres, approximately half of China's 4,650 acres. Meanwhile, landfill work and dredging have enabled Vietnam to expand infrastructure on the islands under its control (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2025). However, such actions should be viewed in the broader context of Vietnam's overall strategy, and not just as internal balancing against China. Hanoi views economic development and defence as interconnected priorities (Thayer 2025: 61). Vietnam's 2018 Resolution 36-NQ/TW "Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Vietnam's Maritime Economy by 2030, with a Vision to 2045," outlined six critical areas for development (Pham Binh 2021). Increased island building in the South China Sea enhances Vietnam's ability to facilitate resource extraction, whether oil and gas or marine mineral resources, link up its coastal industry, and coordinate sea transport. In short, increased island building both raises the cost of potential Chinese aggression and improves economic development initiatives, thereby elevating Vietnam's strategic autonomy.

The Russia-Ukraine War

The war between Russia and Ukraine has likewise challenged Vietnam's attempts to remain uninvolved in great-power politics, complicating a relationship that bears immense historical and political significance. Even as economic ties have seemingly ebbed and flowed, Russia enjoys a special status within Vietnamese foreign relations because of its role in the Vietnam War and support thereafter. Today, it serves as a key partner in drilling for oil in the South China Sea, acts as a strategic outlet against pressure from Washington and Beijing, and represents approximately 81 per cent of Vietnam's arms imports over the past three decades (Nguyen Ba Hai and Kobayashi 2024: 3). The relationship might not be asymmetrical in the sense that Moscow can wield immense influence over Hanoi's security or economy, but its sheer size, normative overlaps, and divergence from China and the US make

its existence critical for Vietnam. The increased pressure placed on the relationship in recent years is perhaps best summarised by the Russian foreign minister's statement on the celebration of the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2025. He stated that Hanoi and Moscow have "overcome the test of time and political circumstances" (Viet Nam News 2025b). Delineating Vietnam's response to the war and how the country navigates increased challenges to procuring Russian arms demonstrates how it has leveraged all three elements of strategic autonomy to both reinforce and manage its dependency on Russia, as well as to maintain the autonomy necessary to do so.

The invasion of Ukraine invokes comparisons to Vietnam's precarious, asymmetrical relationship with China, and the violation of sovereignty contravenes Vietnam's strong adherence to sovereignty and territorial integrity. After the conflict's outbreak, public sentiment in Vietnam leaned towards support for Ukraine (To 2022). Hanoi anchors its response to its own national interests – a commitment to peace, international law, and sovereignty (Pham Thi Yen 2024: 217). Ukraine itself has been a comprehensive partner of Vietnam since 2011. Pham Minh Chinh met with Volodymyr Zelensky on the sidelines of the G7 summit in 2023, and again at Davos in 2025. In both cases, he emphasised that the conflict should be settled through the principles of international law and the respect for independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity (Vietnamese Government 2025).

Internationally, however, a large degree of tacit support for Russia can be observed. In the eight United Nations Security Council resolutions pertaining to the conflict, Vietnam has abstained on all but one – voting against the General Assembly's resolution to suspend Russia's membership of the UN Human Rights Council. Such a dual strategy can be seen in its domestic framing of the situation. Although domestic outlets rarely stray from describing the conflict as a "special military operation," there are prominent examples in which the terms "aggression" or "attack" have been used (Vuving 2024: 104).

Moreover, the conflict has not stopped Vietnam from deepening its engagement with Moscow. Hanoi hosted a state visit by President Vladimir Putin in July 2024, shortly after he visited North Korea, where he signed a CSP, enabling North Korean soldiers to join the battlefield in Ukraine, a move widely criticised in the West. On the cusp of Putin's Hanoi visit, the US embassy in Hanoi issued a statement saying that "no country should give Putin a platform to promote his war of aggression and otherwise allow him to normalize his atrocities" (Mainichi Daily News 2024). Yet, Vietnam held firm, emphasising its ability to act autonomously.

Vietnam's growing convergence with BRICS also encapsulates its strategy of maintaining rhetorical space yet practical connection with Russia, as well as demonstrating an alternative multilateral platform to bolster its support for a multipolar order. In October 2024, Vietnam attended the BRICS summit as a guest for the first time in its history. This move fits into the broader picture of ASEAN nations' growing enthusiasm for the group (Seah 2024). However, when pressed about whether Vietnam would join BRICS, as Indonesia had done, Vietnam's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson responded: "As an active and responsible member of the international community, Vietnam has been and will continue to actively and responsibly contribute to multilateral mechanisms, organizations and forums" (Viet Nam News 2025a). Vietnam has instead opted for partner status, officially becoming a partner nation in June 2025. Despite the complications that engagement with BRICS may present to its partnership with the US and the West, Vietnam's flirtation with BRICS "signals its support for a multipolar order that does not require choosing between Washington and Beijing" (Itsi 2025).

Vietnam's ability to boost strategic autonomy vis-à-vis its relationship with Moscow can be observed in its procurement of arms, clearly demonstrating the triad of strategic dependency management, alternative sources, and domestic-oriented strengthening since the Thirteenth National Party Congress. Between 1995 and 2014, Vietnam purchased 90 per cent of its arms from Russia. However, Russia's invasion of Crimea and the subsequent escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine resulted in strict sanctions against Russia, culminating in the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. These events sparked alarm within Vietnam over its apparent

reliance on Russian arms, sparking calls to diversify its supply sources. Consequently, between 2014 and 2021, Vietnam purchased only 68.4 per cent of its arms from Russia (Le Hong Hiep 2022). The Ukraine War further complicated the matter by making Russia less likely to export weapons it would need to fight in the conflict, and its expulsion from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication made procuring arms from Russia logistically difficult.

This complicated picture would appear to impede a Thirteenth National Party Congress resolution which sought to modernise the Vietnamese army. However, Hanoi has been able to source arms and defensive equipment from a range of suppliers, including Israel, Belarus, South Korea, and the Netherlands. Vietnam has become the inaugural Southeast Asian customer for South Korea's arms exports, acquiring 20 K9 howitzers from Hanwha Aerospace through a USD 300 million agreement (Bisht 2025). Additionally, the country is finalising negotiations with India to purchase BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles, something India has already agreed to supply to the Philippines (Singh 2025). The US also supplies arms to Vietnam, including a Hamilton patrol ship and ScanEagle surveillance plane in 2019. In April 2025, Vietnam reportedly agreed to purchase F-16 fighter jets from the US (Strangio 2025).

External procurement has been complemented by Hanoi's efforts to nurture a domestic defence industry. In December 2022, Vietnam inaugurated the first International Defense Expo, where 174 exhibitors from 30 countries, including Russia and the US, displayed the latest arms. The follow-up expo held in 2024 was an even larger event, with Vietnamese military enterprises participating in 1,872 bilateral meetings to discuss collaboration and technology transfer. Even countries experiencing elevated tensions, such as Iran, Israel, Russia, the US, and China, attended. The second event also saw an increasing array of domestic industries showcase their missile defence systems, drones, air defence radars, armoured vehicles and artillery (Nitta 2024b). The state-owned Viettel Group showcased over 80 products (Thayer 2025: 39), highlighting Vietnam's potential to become a leading arms exporter.

Still, reduced reliance should not be misinterpreted as distancing. Despite turning to alternative sources, Vietnam has strong institutional and practical reasons for continuing to procure most of its arms from Russia. Higher echelons of the military establishment prefer Russia because many were trained in Moscow and because arms deals with Moscow avoid the scrutiny associated with deals with the West. Russian arms are also cheaper (Le Hong Hiep 2022). Vietnam's success at the International Defense Expo was predicated on its ability to improve and modernise weapons acquired from Russia.

Meanwhile, at the Russian-organised International-Military-Technical Forum (ARMY) in 2023, the Russian Defense Minister stated that "Vietnam would be most interested in arms and military technology on display" (Interfax 2023). A high-ranking delegation led by Minister of National Defense Phan Van Giang also attended ARMY 2024. Moreover, Vietnam is exploring workarounds to the sanctions on Russia. A circulated Ministry of Finance document reported on in the New York Times indicated that Vietnam plans to pay for future purchases via a joint Vietnamese and Russian oil venture: Rusvietpetro (Beech 2023). Viewed through the lens of strategic autonomy, this demonstrates that Vietnam's continued support from Russia and the diversification of its supply sources to include other international and domestic partners should be seen as complementary rather than contradictory.

Enhancing Strategic Autonomy for Economic Growth

To Lam's new era of national rise is underpinned by economic development. The first phase of the rise involves a sprint period between 2025 and 2030, where the state apparatus aims to work tirelessly to generate the necessary momentum to fulfil the goals set out at the Thirteenth National Party Congress (Phan 2025). This section explores three critical areas for Vietnam's economy and overall development: infrastructure, energy, and FDI. These areas are intrinsically linked to Vietnam's broader foreign policy goal of deepening regional and international integration, promoting economic

development and protecting Vietnam's national security in strategic areas. Cultivating greater strategic autonomy in these areas necessitates working with international partners, as well as generating greater capacity to act independently. Recent initiatives in these areas show how the state is leveraging strategic dependencies while simultaneously boosting its resilience against the negative implications associated with them.

Infrastructure

The state identifies infrastructure as crucial to economic growth, regarding infrastructure projects as the shortest path towards development (Nhan Dan 2025a). State spending on infrastructure reflects its importance. Among Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam spends the highest amount of its budget – roughly 6% of its GDP – on infrastructure (Chapman 2025a). Vietnam is essentially an “infrastructure state,” where the government draws legitimacy through large-scale infrastructure projects. However, initiating such projects requires navigating the fraught politics of the geopolitical competitions between China and the US, as well as those between other regional powers, to gain foreign loans to finance such projects (Schindler *et al.* 2021: 332). Vietnamese infrastructure projects have often been funded in part or in whole by foreign partners. Traditionally, Vietnam has eschewed Beijing-backed infrastructure projects for fear of handing it a greater political stick with which to wield, as well as a general perception within the Vietnamese populace that Chinese-backed infrastructure is inferior to that backed by Japan and the West (Turner *et al.* 2024: 232). The development of the Hanoi Urban Railway Line 2A provides a telling case in point. Originally announced in 2008, two-thirds of the project was funded by Chinese preferential loans. Its planned completion in 2013 was not achieved until November 2021, and the project was tarnished by accidents, a ballooning of costs from USD 553 million to USD 900 million, and public scepticism regarding its largely above-ground location. Equally egregious for many was that Chinese financing was conditional on the majority of materials being sourced from China (Turner *et al.* 2024: 226).

As such, Vietnam's adoption of the Belt and Road Initiative has been lukewarm (Le Hong Hiep 2018). Hanoi has also denied Chinese funding for the Van Don-Mong Cai Highway, opted to work without Huawei to develop 5G infrastructure, and cancelled plans for special economic zones after widespread protests broke out. Vietnam's historical strategy towards this conundrum has relied on closer engagement with Japan on infrastructure (Liao and Dang 2020). However, projects funded by countries other than China have also encountered significant problems. The Japan International Cooperation Agency funded the Ho Chi Minh City Metro. It opened to the public in December 2024, four years behind schedule. Its journey to completion was marked by cost overruns and delayed payments to contractors, even resulting in the contractor Hitachi suing Ho Chi Minh City (Hong and Duc 2024). Other projects funded by international partners, such as the Tran Hoang Na Bridge and Hanoi Metro Line 3 project, have been similarly problematic. The latter opened nine years later than scheduled and nearly USD 400 million over budget (Nitta 2024a).

To address such problems, the state has sought to strengthen domestic capabilities to deliver eye-catching infrastructure projects whilst simultaneously leaning into existing dependencies to safeguard against potential pitfalls. Take the ambitious, high-speed rail (HSR) that was announced in December 2024. The USD 67 billion project aims to link Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City in just five and a half hours, with an ambitious completion date of 2035. Surprisingly, the Politburo announced in a “spirit of independence and self-reliance,” that the state would not utilise foreign loans, instead turning to government bonds, low-interest loans, the state budget, and domestic investors to complete the project (Doan Loan 2024). More recently, the domestic enterprise Vinspeed has proposed an even speedier completion date of 2030 (Phuong Dung and Doan Loan 2025). Upon first glance, this project would suggest that Vietnam is completely rejecting foreign assistance. However, closer inspection of the finer details demonstrates that the plan includes additional safeguards should Vietnam require

foreign investment. The law approved by the National Assembly affords the Prime Minister the discretion to issue Overseas Development Aid (ODA) and foreign loans if financial problems arise. It also stipulates that, should international bids become necessary, they must come with commitments for technology transfer and human resource training (Vu Nguyen Hanh 2024). Vietnam has also asked Japan to provide scholarships for short-term and long-term training courses for Vietnamese railway engineers to better equip the domestic workforce to run HSR (Voice of Viet Nam 2024).

HSR is not the only example of a greater public–private partnership in funding major infrastructure projects (Minh Hue 2025a). Such initiatives deliver enhanced control and independence, as seen in the case of the Long Thanh International Airport, located 40 km northeast of Ho Chi Minh City. Designed to become Southeast Asia's largest airport, it will serve as a regional hub for international cargo and passengers. Groundbreaking took place in September 2021 on the roughly USD 14 billion project, which is split into three phases. Whilst the first phase was slated for completion at the end of 2025, the need for a second runway, along with various delays, postponed completion to the end of 2026 – a minor setback compared to the metro line projects in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Viet Tuan 2024). The state-owned Airports Corporation of Vietnam has been the principal investor in the project. The state has been able to tap into state-owned lenders, securing the biggest loan in Vietnamese banking history, and also at more favourable lending conditions than those offered by international credit institutions. Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh stated that the project serves as a broader piece of the “country's strategy to drive up socio-economic growth, ensure national defence and security, and enhance diplomatic activities and international integration” (Tieu Bac and Le Thanh 2024).

The North-South Highway project, which aims to revamp the country's highway infrastructure from Lang Son to Ca Mau, is another example. Initially, the government struggled to find private sector funding for the expressway and tendered international bids. Although they received interest from investors from China, South Korea, Japan, and France, the government announced in 2019 that it was switching to local bidding, citing national security and a need to improve Vietnamese firms (Dat Nguyen 2019). To date, approximately 654 km of the highway is in operation, with a further 721 km scheduled for completion by 2026 (Minh Hue 2025a).

Vietnam's drive towards greater autonomy and control over large infrastructure projects is strengthened by domestic reforms (as will be discussed in the FDI section) and a greater capacity for domestic firms to play a role in them. The steel company Hoa Phat, for example, has played a key role in the Long Thanh International Airport project. Exports originally underpinned its rise to becoming the largest steel producer in Southeast Asia. Today, the firm targets domestic infrastructure as a key source of growth in an era of greater international trade volatility. It has started the operation of a new USD 3.34 billion steel plant in Quang Ngai, which will increase output from 8.6 million tons per year to 14.5 million and has earmarked nearly USD 400 million for a rail track production project for Vietnam's push for high-speed rail (Nhan Dan 2025b). Equally important in this regard, however, has been an agreement with Germany's SMS Group, which provides the necessary technology and production loans for manufacturing steel rails and shaped steel, making Vietnam the only company in Southeast Asia capable of producing steel rails for HSR (Lan Do 2025).

An increasing turn inwards, however, should not be understood as eschewing investment from foreign sources entirely, even China. In February 2025, Vietnam announced the Lao Cai–Hanoi–Hai Phong railway, which has plans to extend into the Chinese city of Kunming to boost regional connectivity. China is funding USD 8.3 billion of the project, along with domestic funds (Khanh Vu 2025). Nguyen Khanh Tung, Deputy Director of the Railway Project Management Board under the Ministry of Construction, proclaimed that the project's implementation aligned with the Belt and Road Initiative (Van Nguyen 2025). This aligns with the broader trend of increased Chinese investment in Vietnam. As we will additionally see with FDI, Hanoi gains greater confidence in welcoming Chinese investment vis-à-vis alternative investment sources and enhanced domestic capacity.

Energy

Energy is a critical area for state security, and high economic growth likewise necessitates a higher demand for energy. Vietnamese citizens are no longer content with subsistence-level energy consumption, and the country's semiconductor strategy, launched in February 2025, together with its push to harness AI, will also intensify Vietnam's energy demand (Leducq and Scarwell 2018: 79). Vietnam's electricity demand rose 27% from 2018 to 2023 (Maguire 2025). Former Chairman of the National Assembly Office Nguyen Sy Dung has stated that for GDP to grow by 1%, electricity supply must also grow (Vietnam Plus 2025a). This was brought home in the summer of 2023, when the state embarrassingly had to implement rolling blackouts in the North to cope with the surge in energy demand, costing the economy roughly USD 1.4 billion (Malesky and Thiem 2024: 365).

The state is, however, pushing hard to ensure that it can meet its future energy needs. In line with its 2020 Resolution on its National Energy Development Strategy, the government approved Power Development Plan Eight in 2023, which was further amended in April 2025. The plan lays out a roadmap towards net-zero emissions with a high degree of flexibility in energy sources: thermal, liquefied natural gas, coal, and renewable (Cyrill 2024). These will come from a mixture of domestic and international initiatives. Vietnam aims to import as much as 8,000 MW from Lao. These developments have been boosted by the state-owned Vietnamese electrification of a transmission line between Lao's monsoon wind power plant to a substation in Quang Nam Province (Southeast Asia Infrastructure 2025). China is also a possible supplier that could help address energy shortages through imports. The Ministry of Industry and Trade is proposing importing approximately 3,700 MW of electricity from China by 2030, with Vietnam Electricity currently negotiating additional energy purchases from Beijing (Minh Hue 2025b). PetroVietnam has also signed agreements with two American energy companies to source liquefied natural gas from the United States (Nikše 2025).

While the use of coal might conflict with Vietnam's commitment to phase out coal power by 2050, it is, at least in the short term, critical for meeting Vietnam's immediate energy demands. According to Ember², coal-fired power stations generated half of Vietnam's electricity in 2024. Traditionally, coal has come from domestic sources, and even in 2022, the country produced 48 million tons of coal. In recent years, however, coal imports have become increasingly important, with Vietnam poised to become the world's fifth-largest coal importer³. Thanks to the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement, Indonesia has emerged as Vietnam's leading supplier, providing tariff-free coal. Australia ranks as the second-largest source, followed by Russia.

Vietnam's revival of its nuclear power plants serves as another prominent example of its drive for greater strategic autonomy. The original plans for Vietnam's first two nuclear power plants were shelved in 2016 due to safety and budget concerns. Japanese Atomic Power Co was intended to fund the majority of the first plant, whilst Russia's Rosatom was scheduled to fund the second. In its drive to facilitate economic growth, the government revived the plans in 2024, with plans to seek funding from a greater range of sources. The Prime Minister designated Vietnam Electricity as the principal investor in the Ninh Thuan 1 plant and Petrovietnam as the investor in the Ninh Thuan 2 plant. Both are also tasked with forming a group that coordinates its work with previous partners – Japan and Russia – and three additional ones: France, South Korea, and the United States (Khanh Vu and Phuong Nguyen 2025). Russia and Vietnam already inked a cooperative agreement in January 2025 (Ghosal 2025). Meanwhile, Vietnam is working with Japan to promote human resource development as opposed to strictly financing, leveraging existing university partnership agreements, such as those between Nagaoka University of Technology and Fukui University (Tri Duc 2024). South Korea has also inked nuclear deals with Vietnam (Borowiec and Mai Nguyen 2025). It aims for project completion by December 2031, at the latest.

²<https://ember-energy.org/countries-and-regions/viet-nam>

³<https://www.iea.org/data-and-statistics/charts/coal-imports-of-select-countries-2014-2024>

FDI

Throughout the Doi Moi era, Vietnam has demonstrated a notable success in attracting FDI, which has been vital in Vietnam's economic achievements. FDI inflows in 2006 stood at USD 4.1 billion, increasing to USD 18 billion per year between 2015–2021 (Kokko *et al.* 2023: 176). The FDI sector also accounts for a staggering amount of Vietnam's exports, raising questions about its potential over-reliance on FDI. Take Samsung, for example. In 2019, Samsung accounted for roughly 19% of the 67.8% of export turnover recorded in 2019, an eye-watering sum for a single company (Le Hong Hiep 2020c). Moreover, the spillover effects of FDI have been sluggish. While indicators such as job creation and exports are high, local companies have struggled integrate into the supply chain. In 2014, for example, only four domestic suppliers were used in Samsung's supply chain (Kokko *et al.* 2023: 177). As recently as 2020, Apple AirPods made in Vietnam were sourced from 21 domestic suppliers, none of which were Vietnamese (Trung Quang Nguyen *et al.* 2023). In response, Vietnam has sought to recalibrate its reliance on FDI, implementing policies to ensure that domestic industries can meet the demands of foreign enterprises, and encouraging foreign companies to ensure spillovers benefit Vietnamese domestic enterprises. In short, Vietnam is pushing for greater strategic autonomy vis-à-vis management of its strategic dependencies through domestic restructuring.

The Politburo recognised the skewed environment towards foreign firms in 2019 when it issued Resolution 50-NQ/TW, which aimed to improve institutions and policies that enhanced the quality and efficiency of foreign investment cooperation. This included increasing the percentage of trained and qualified workers, encouraging technological and management methods that transfer know-how to Vietnamese firms, requiring investors to use local labourers, and synchronising legal systems to ensure equal treatment between foreign and domestic investors (Resolution 50/NQ-TW 2019). The government subsequently approved a strategy for Foreign Investment Cooperation 2021–2030. This initiative sought to help Vietnam gain from international integration by spreading technology, building internal skills, and boosting efficiency (Nhan Dan 2022).

These efforts have been coupled with strategic policies to rectify the traditional weaknesses of domestic firms in moving higher up the value chain. Resolution 57 sets out critical targets for research and development, with 3% of the annual budget allocated to the cause, promoting preferential policies for small and medium enterprises that enable them to invest in digital transformation, attract FDI to expand further, and even create opportunities for overseas investment (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam Government News 2024). Vietnam's semiconductor strategy, unveiled in February 2024, outlines a three-stage roadmap. The current stage (2024–2030) aims to utilise geopolitical and human resource advantages to attract selective FDI and turn the country into a global hub for semiconductor talent. In the next phase (2030–2040), Vietnam hopes to balance this approach and leverage domestic sources in conjunction with FDI, capitalising on the 200 semiconductor design companies, two chip fabrication plants, and fifteen packaging and testing plants that it aims to have in place by then. These will grow to 300, 3, and 20, respectively, by 2050, when the country aims to be among the top producers of semiconductors globally (Hai Phong 2024). Lastly, the Politburo issued Resolution 68 in May 2025. This landmark resolution cemented the private sector as the main engine of Vietnam's future economic growth, moving away from its previous reliance on state-owned enterprises as the catalysts for growth, instead relegating them to a supporting role (Chapman 2025b). It directs state organs to reduce administrative burdens, increase protections for private businesses, and ease access to land, facilities, and capital for private firms, with clear targets to double the amount of private enterprises and create large conglomerates, or “national champions,” that can become global leaders in innovation and technological development (Nguyen Khac Giang 2025: 3). These developments will help domestic firms compete with foreign ones and enable them to better integrate into global supply chains.

The state has also sought to rein in some of the institutional bottlenecks to FDI. Upon filling the vacant secretary general position following Nguyen Phu Trong's death, To Lam has embarked on the biggest administrative reforms in Vietnam's post-reunification era. He implemented a radical overhaul of the public sector to rid it of inefficiency, merging 40 ministries and 22 agencies. He proclaimed that the state must no longer serve as a "safe haven for weak officials," and that "If we want to have a healthy body, sometimes we must take bitter medicine and endure pain to remove tumors" (Voice of America 2025). As Fforde (2023: 253) argues, economic restructuring conditions political change, and that change has arrived. Meanwhile, Vietnam has radically redrawn the administrative map. On July 1, 2025, 63 provinces and municipalities were consolidated into 34, district-level administrations were abolished, and two-thirds of all wards and communes were dissolved (Hai Thanh Nguyen and Phan Le 2025).

Lam's appointment also suggests a cooling of the anti-corruption drive that blazed during Trong's time. Trong's signature *đốt lò*, or the burning furnace, sought to boost the legitimacy of the VCP in the eyes of the public and push back against the narrative that corruption had flourished under former prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung. It resulted in numerous high-profile corruption cases and even reached the higher echelons of the CPV leadership, leading to the downfall of Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and President Vo Van Thuong. However, the anti-corruption campaign has had some unintended consequences. Intel shelved expansion plans in the country, with sources close to the matter citing bureaucracy and concerns about its ability to meet energy demands (Strangio 2023). A National Assembly member remarked in 2023: "state cadres and civil servants, including leaders, do not dare to work because if they do, they are afraid of making mistakes" (Malesky and Thiem 2024: 364). Approximately 100,000 public officials have left their roles since 2021 (Wilkes 2024). While high-profile corruption cases are still ongoing, Lam has since stated that the fight against corruption must not hinder social and economic development (BBC News 2024). Likewise, Lam awarded former Nguyen Tan Dung the Golden Star Order, Vietnam's highest decoration, a move unthinkable under Trong (Vietnam Express 2025).

Institutional and policy reforms conducive to domestic industries and FDI have been in lockstep with partnership agreements that facilitate greater spillover. Vietnam and the US chip giant Synopsys inked a memorandum of understanding whereby the latter will establish a chip design centre and train Vietnamese workers in chip design (Dat Nguyen 2022). Likewise, the Ministry of Industry and Trade has coordinated with Samsung to develop a domestic supplier program (Vietnam Plus 2021). Additionally, HSR links any potential usage of FDI to strict requirements for technological transfer. Apple CEO Tim Cook also paid a visit to Vietnam in 2024, where he met with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh. Chinh directly asked Cook for support in training human resources and embedding Vietnamese suppliers deeper into Apple's supply chain (Ha Van 2024).

While the full effects of these measures will take time to emerge, early indicators are promising. Vietnam attracted USD 26.14 billion in FDI for the first eight months of 2025, with USD 15.4 billion already disbursed, an increase of 8% from the previous year (Vietnam Plus 2025b). Meanwhile, outbound investment was nearly four times higher, indicating domestic firms are enjoying increased strength, financial stability, and ability to compete in international markets (Nguyen Huong 2025a). Interestingly, FDI from China is increasing, with China becoming the second-largest investor behind Singapore, and the largest investor if investment from Hong Kong is included. Le Hong Hiep (2024) notes that Chinese investments are vital for Vietnam's economic development, and that enhanced investment could serve as a bargaining chip when dealing with Beijing's assertiveness in the South China Sea. Whether this possibility will be realised remains to be seen. Still, just like with Chinese-backed infrastructure projects, it demonstrates a growing comfort with Chinese investment. Resolution 50 spelt out an evaluation mechanism for foreign-invested projects considered a potential risk to national security. Vietnam maintains strategic autonomy in FDI by building domestic capabilities to reinforce its capacity to manage strategic dependencies.

Conclusion

This study examined the core components of Vietnam's quest for greater strategic autonomy in an era of increasing geopolitical volatility and complex interdependence, arguing that Vietnam does so through managing its strategic dependencies, leveraging its diverse array of international partners to avoid over-reliance, and strengthening its domestic capacity to act independently in strategic areas. Through these measures, it furthers its foreign policy goals of securing a peaceful international system based on multilateralism, international law, win-win economic gains, and the protection of its own national sovereignty. Such methods can be seen in Vietnam's response to an enhanced US–China rivalry and the Russia–Ukraine War, together with its pursuit of infrastructure development, energy security, and “the new wave of FDI” (Lourey 2025).

Strategic autonomy is a useful concept because it moves beyond binary interpretations of Vietnam's interactions with international partners. For Vietnam, closer cooperation with Beijing does not constitute a turn away from the West, just as greater cooperation with Washington does now represent a turn away from Beijing (Hayton 2024; Patton 2025; Viet and Dieu 2024: 121). Vietnam uses strategic autonomy as a guiding principle in its foreign policy to justify shifting alignments with countries like the US, China, and Russia. This approach accepts dependence while preserving self-agency, managing relationships rather than avoiding them. Strategic autonomy enables Vietnam to accommodate diverse interpretations of its foreign policy through consistent principles and adaptable tactics.

The unpacking of strategic autonomy comes at a time when countries are increasingly incorporating it into their foreign policy frameworks. Developing a better understanding of strategic autonomy will enable Vietnam to better operationalise the concept within its national context. To Lam has closed the door on the Doi Moi era, ushering in the era of National Rise. Speaking at the World Leaders' Forum at Columbia University, where he became the first communist leader to address the forum, Lam stressed that Vietnam's ambitious economic goals cannot be achieved without solidarity, valuable support, and effective cooperation from the global community (Asia News Network 2025). Achieving these aims requires having a multifaceted and dynamic approach at a time characterised by uncertainty, as evidenced by the ongoing bid to negotiate tariffs with the current Trump administration.

Given this, as well as the imminent convening of the Fourteenth National Party Congress, it is prudent to assess Vietnam's current position amid growing international complexities and to consider strategies for navigating future uncertainties. While significant shifts in Vietnam's policy of multidirectional foreign relations are improbable, the concept of strategic autonomy may be more strongly emphasised in forthcoming party documentation.

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