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The Lessons of Ho Chi Minh's Diplomatic Thought for Vietnam amidst Current U.S.-China Competition

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Abstract: Drawing on former President Ho Chi Minh's dictum that "Independence means being the master of one's own affairs, allowing no interference," this article examines three pillars of his diplomacy—independence and self-reliance, flexibility through the principle of "unchanging in the face of myriad changes," (*dĩ bất biến ứng vạn biến*) and the balance of power—to propose an expanded framework of "soft balancing" suited to the contemporary context. Employing a comparative historical analysis (1945–1969 and 2000–2025), foreign policy analysis, and discourse analysis, the study cross-references archival materials with datasets on Sino–Soviet wartime aid and current U.S./China trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) flows. The findings indicate that the principle of autonomy has enabled Vietnam to maintain a "hedging" posture, thereby expanding its strategic space through multilateral diplomacy without compromising its independence. Theoretically, the paper contributes to the neorealist–neoliberal debate on small-state autonomy by integrating Ho Chi Minh's pragmatic approach into contemporary international relations discourse. Practically, it offers policy recommendations aimed at strengthening Vietnam's resilience amid intensifying great-power rivalry.

Keywords: independence and self-reliance; diplomatic flexibility; expanded soft balancing; Vietnam's foreign policy.

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1. Introduction

The rapid rise of China, together with the United States' "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) initiative, has intensified the geostrategic rivalry between the two superpowers to its most acute level since the end of the Cold War. Vietnam – situated at the crossroads of Southeast Asia and economically interlinked with both Washington and Beijing – faces a dual challenge: to avoid dependency while flexibly seizing opportunities for cooperation. Scholars have noted Vietnam's persistent adherence to the principles of "multilateralization and diversification" and "strategic autonomy". However, the extent to which former President Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic legacy has been updated for the contemporary era—and how that legacy can be meaningfully connected with modern

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concepts such as *hedging* and *soft balancing*—remains insufficiently explored. To address this gap, the study poses two key research questions: (1) Which core principles of Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic thought continue to hold enduring relevance for Vietnam today? (2) How have these principles been applied in Vietnam's strategic responses to U.S.–China competition during the period spanning 2000–2025?

Comparing the eras of 1945–1969 and 2000–2025 connects Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic thought to small-state agency and hedging theory. The proposed strategy of expanded soft balancing combines ASEAN multilateralism, technological partnerships with Japan, India, and the EU, and people-to-people diplomacy to widen Vietnam's strategic choices while preserving independence.

The extant literature on Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic thought largely converges on three pillars: independence and self-reliance, diplomatic flexibility, and the balance of power. Yet most domestic scholarship remains descriptive and historical in orientation, with limited, systematic linkage to contemporary great-power competition (Nguyen Dy Nien 2008; Tran Thi Minh Tuyet 2016; Vo Nguyen Giap 2004; Vu Duong Huan 2005). By contrast, international studies tend to follow three directions: neorealism, emphasizing *hard balancing*; neoliberalism, privileging absolute gains and institutional cooperation; and hybrid approaches that foreground *hedging* and *soft balancing*—a "double-betting" strategy to mitigate uncertainty (Kuik 2008; Keohane 1984; Mearsheimer 2001). Nevertheless, few works explicitly connect these theoretical frameworks to Ho Chi Minh's intellectual legacy. With respect to Vietnam specifically, recent analyses (Grossman 2020; Hoang Thi Ha 2024; Le Hong Hiep 2015) argue that Hanoi maintains a "defensive hedging" posture grounded in the three pillars above, but they still lack theoretical depth in integrating Ho Chi Minh's thought.

The framework situates independence and self-reliance along the neorealist–neoliberal spectrum as soft-power capital, treats diplomatic flexibility as a mechanism of hedging through multilateralism, and interprets power balancing as expanded soft balancing through middle-power partnerships and technological cooperation. These connections guide the assessment of Vietnam's foreign policy amid U.S.–China rivalry.

Methodologically, the study employs a multi-layered qualitative design: (1) comparative historical analysis divides the trajectory into two benchmarks—1945–1969 (Vietnam amid Sino–Soviet competition) and 2000–2025 (Vietnam amid U.S.–China rivalry)—to identify continuities in geostrategic position, regional power structure, and national interests; (2) foreign policy analysis (FPA) traces decision-formation through resolutions, directives, and joint statements; and (3) discourse analysis maps leaders' and media's "lexical landscape." Quantitative data drawn from the following sources serve for cross-validation: the Sino–Soviet aid series, 1950–1969 (million USD, 2015 prices) is recalibrated from Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Defense archives; and bilateral trade and foreign direct investment (FDI), 2000–2024, are extracted from UN Comtrade and the General Statistics Office.

Section 2 of the article outlines Ho Chi Minh's three principles of diplomacy; Section 3 examines their application in 1945–1969; Section 4 considers the period 2000–2025; and Section 5 develops the theoretical discussion and policy implications.

2. The Three Core Principles of Ho Chi Minh's Diplomatic Thought

Throughout his revolutionary life, President Ho Chi Minh displayed a deep spirit of independent autonomy, consistently emphasizing the importance of preserving independence and avoiding subservience to any significant power (Nguyen Chi Vinh 2017). This ideology served as a guiding principle for Vietnam's struggle for national liberation and formed the foundation of its foreign policy. One of the core tenets of Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic thinking is captured in his principle of "using constancy to respond to change" (*dĩ bất biến ứng vạn biến*), which involved upholding core values while employing flexibility in dealing with changing situations (Pham Hong Hai 2023). Furthermore, Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic ideology is evident in his skillful maintenance of balanced relations and soft diplomacy between major powers, safeguarding national interests, and bolstering Vietnam's standing on the international stage (Tran Tuan Phong and Süper 2019).

2.1. Independent Autonomy

Independent autonomy is one of the most fundamental principles in Ho Chi Minh's ideology. For him, independence was the ultimate goal in the struggle for national liberation and a vital principle in building and protecting the nation. He asserted that a country can develop and prosper only when it determines its own path, free from the control of foreign powers, and ensuring it does not "become a pawn in someone else's game" (Tran Vi Dan 2021). Ho Chi Minh understood that to gain and maintain independence, Vietnam must be self-reliant, mobilize internal resources, and strengthen its self-defense capabilities. This spirit of independent autonomy was reflected in his approach to avoiding excessive dependence on aid from a single country, embracing self-sufficiency, and upholding the right to self-determination. Ho Chi Minh frequently stressed the importance of maintaining independence in international relations, ensuring that Vietnam could independently shape its foreign policies without relying on great power (Duiker 2000).

In relations with China, Ho Chi Minh maintained a stance of independence, leveraging support but avoiding excessive dependence while resolutely protecting national interests and sovereignty (Huyen Trang 2015). Similarly, while the Soviet Union supported Vietnam during the anti-American resistance, Ho Chi Minh maintained an independent stance, ensuring that the Soviet Union did not dominate Vietnam's domestic policies (Nguyen Chi Vinh 2017).

Ho Chi Minh also emphasized the development of a self-sufficient economy to minimize dependence on foreign sources. He urged the population to focus on production, savings, and self-sufficiency in meeting basic needs, aiming to build a robust economy based on internal resources (Pham Ngoc Phuong 2020). As he stated: "The Soviet Union and China help us generously to enable us to develop our self-reliance" (Ho Chi Minh 2011d: 103). In addition, he recognized that to safeguard independence and sovereignty, Vietnam required a robust military force: "Our army is loyal to the Party, faithful to the people, ready to fight and sacrifice for national independence and socialism. Any task will be completed, any difficulty overcome, any enemy defeated" (Ho Chi Minh 2011e: 435). Under his leadership, the Vietnam People's Army was strengthened to ensure its capability to defend against external aggression, contributing to national security and the protection of revolutionary

achievements (Political Theory Journal 2022).

Ho Chi Minh remained vigilant against any attempts to undermine Vietnam's autonomy. He was adamant that no significant power would impose policies or exert undue influence over Vietnam's strategic decisions (Le Van Thuat 2023). In an interview with Reuters in 1947, Ho Chi Minh declared: "Independence means that we control all our affairs without outside interference" (Ho Chi Minh 2011a: 162). According to him, Vietnam's independence always depended on its own strength, with his guiding principle being: "Self-reliance is primary, assistance from friendly countries is supplementary. Assistance from friends is like additional capital for us. We must skillfully use that capital to enhance our strength and expand our capabilities. However, our people and cadres must not become dependent because of the support" (Ho Chi Minh 2011d: 56-57). Additionally, Ho Chi Minh encouraged creativity and flexibility in economic and social policies, seeking solutions best suited to Vietnam's specific conditions rather than rigidly following any external model (Pham Ngoc Phuong 2020). By maintaining independent autonomy, Vietnam could make its own decisions in international relations. Ho Chi Minh did not solely seek support from the Soviet Union and China but also expanded relations with other countries, mainly Western nations. He aimed to ensure that Vietnam could receive support without sacrificing self-determination (Duiker 2000).

2.2. Flexibility - "Using Constancy to Respond to Change"

The policy of "using constancy to respond to change" is a fundamental principle in Ho Chi Minh's ideology on foreign affairs. "Constancy" here refers to upholding core, unchanging values and goals. Ho Chi Minh consistently defended foundational principles such as independence, autonomy, and the protection of national sovereignty, even in the face of pressure from major powers. "Responding to change" meant adapting flexibly to circumstances and evolving situations to achieve these objectives (Pham Hong Hai 2023; Pham Thi Hoa 2020; Nguyen Van Lan 2022). This principle reflected Ho Chi Minh's skillful and adaptable approach to foreign policy in safeguarding and advancing Vietnam's interests. Depending on the situation, he adjusted foreign policy to maximize support from China and the Soviet Union while avoiding unnecessary conflict and tension (Toropchin 2023; Vu Trong Lam 2021).

Ho Chi Minh sought to manage international aid for Vietnam by diversifying sources to avoid over-reliance on any single country, even while receiving support from both China and the Soviet Union. He worked to maintain good relations with both nations to ensure that if one encountered difficulties, Vietnam could rely on the other to continue its struggle and national reconstruction. Ho Chi Minh signed agreements with both China and the Soviet Union to secure consistent aid from both sides (Ho Anh Hai 2019; Luong Thi Lan 2020; Nguyen Van Lan 2022; Pham Thi Thanh Mai 2024). Meanwhile, under Ho Chi Minh's leadership, Vietnam proactively sought support and recognition from various countries, from socialist to non-socialist nations. This strategy helped build a broad and diverse international network, strengthening Vietnam's position and resilience on the global stage (Nguyen Van Lan 2022).

Ho Chi Minh always upheld the principles of independence and autonomy in international relations, emphasizing that,

regardless of circumstances, Vietnam must determine its path without allowing any nation to exert control. While steadfast in principle, Ho Chi Minh employed a flexible approach in his foreign policy strategies, adjusting specific strategies according to international conditions and Vietnam's interests to ensure decisions aligned with the political and economic realities of the time (Pham Thanh Dung 2020). This flexibility in implementing foreign strategies is evident in Ho Chi Minh's role in the 1954 Geneva Accords (Van Thi Thanh Mai 2024; Pham Duc Thuan and Tran Minh Thuan 2024). Although committed to independence and autonomy, Ho Chi Minh accepted a provisional settlement to prevent further conflict and prepare for subsequent steps within the broader trajectory of the struggle for Vietnam's independence. He understood that international and domestic situations required appropriate adjustments to protect national interests (Van Thi Thanh Mai 2024b).

Ho Chi Minh consistently stressed the need for adaptability in foreign policy to respond quickly to changes in the international environment. He believed that in an ever-changing global setting, Vietnam must adjust its foreign policies to safeguard national interests. "Our unchanging goals remain peace, unity, independence, and democracy. Our principles are steadfast, but our strategies are flexible" (Ho Chi Minh 2011c). As Tran Trong Khanh pointed out, Ho Chi Minh adeptly maintained a flexible foreign policy, emphasizing the importance of rapid adaptation to shifts in the international context (Tran Trong Khanh 2024).

Ho Chi Minh's policy of "using constancy to respond to change" allowed Vietnam to react swiftly to transformations in the international landscape, adjusting strategies to protect national interests. This adaptability enabled Vietnam to leverage new opportunities from changing global conditions while effectively addressing emerging challenges. By adhering to core principles, Vietnam has safeguarded its independence and national sovereignty, resisting external pressure and interference.

2.3. Balancing and Multilateralization

The principle of power balancing and multilateralization in Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic thought rests on the view that, to safeguard national independence and sovereignty, Vietnam must not rely exclusively on any single great power but instead balance its relations among them. Ho Chi Minh illustrated this principle vividly through Vietnam's diplomatic strategy during the wars against France and the United States (1945–1969). At that time, Vietnam both leveraged aid from the Soviet Union and received substantial support from China, while consistently maintaining sufficient distance so as not to become a "pawn" in the strategic designs of major powers (Hoang Ngoc Kien 2024). For example, during the Sino–Soviet schism of the 1960s, Ho Chi Minh proactively pursued a delicate balancing policy, advocating reconciliation between the two principal allies to uphold Vietnam's national interests and minimize the adverse effects of their rivalry on Vietnam (You 2023).

In Ho Chi Minh's ideology, balancing relationships and exercising diplomatic flexibility were fundamental in maintaining and developing ties with major powers, especially China and the Soviet Union. Ho Chi Minh was adept at leveraging support from both countries to serve Vietnam's struggle for national liberation and post-war reconstruction, while maintaining independence and ensuring that neither power influenced Vietnam's strategic decisions. He cultivated friendly relations

and avoided potential conflicts, carefully navigating relations with both powers (Luong Thi Lan 2020). While viewing the Soviet Union as a strategic ally, he also maintained close cooperation with China, particularly on security and military issues (Duiker 2000). In 1960, Ho Chi Minh even acted as a mediator in the conflict between the Soviet Union and China, demonstrating a diplomatic approach to preserving unity within the communist bloc (You 2023).

Ho Chi Minh utilized support from China and the Soviet Union during the First Indochina War and the Vietnam War. He received military aid, personnel training, and logistical support from China, strengthening Vietnam's military and resistance capabilities. Throughout the Vietnam War, international aid to Vietnam reached an estimated 2,362,682 tons, valued at seven billion rubles, with Chinese aid accounting for over 50% of this total (Department of Defense Archives n.d.; Luong Thi Lan 2020. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union provided critical economic and military support, including weapons, military equipment, and economic aid, helping Vietnam sustain the war effort and rebuild after the war (Pike 1987). Between 1955 and 1960, the Soviet Union supplied 29,996 tons of military goods, including logistics support, weaponry, and technical equipment. From 1961 to 1964, Soviet aid increased to 47,223 tons of military goods. As Vietnam-Soviet relations strengthened from 1965 to 1968, Soviet aid soared to 226,969 tons, reaching 143,793 tons from 1969 to 1972 and 65,601 tons of logistical and military supplies from 1973 to 1975 (Department of Defense Archives n.d.; Luong Thi Lan 2020). As the Vietnam War escalated, North Vietnam increasingly turned to the Soviet Union for support. However, Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese leaders were cautious about maintaining amicable ties with China, which continued to provide vital logistical and military aid (You 2023).

Ho Chi Minh sustained positive relations with China and the Soviet Union, ensuring continuous support from both sides. He utilized diplomatic channels, negotiations, and exchanges to solidify friendships and avoid potential conflicts. His diplomatic skills enabled Vietnam to secure support from both significant powers without causing tension or conflict between them (Cao and Ding 2020; Nguyen Van Lan 2022; Pike 1987; Wilson Center 2024). Ho Chi Minh's strategy of avoiding conflict, as analyzed in William J. Duiker's (2000) *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*, reflects his strategic vision of the Cold War environment. He understood that tensions between great powers could lead to conflicts detrimental to Vietnam. Thus, he emphasized that Vietnam should maintain independence and avoid being drawn into conflicts among major powers. To achieve this, he adhered to a non-aligned policy, refraining from joining formal military alliances, thereby preserving autonomy in foreign policy decisions. This approach allowed Vietnam to choose partners and strategies flexibly without binding military commitments (Duiker 2000).

Ho Chi Minh also advocated multilateral cooperation and building friendly relations with numerous countries. He recognized that establishing a broad international network would enable Vietnam to gain support and assistance from the global community (Duiker 2000). While valuing relations with allies and international friends, especially within the socialist bloc, Ho Chi Minh also expanded ties with non-socialist countries and international liberation movements (Van Thi Thanh Mai 2024). His guiding principle was that Vietnam was "willing to be friends with all democratic countries and bear[s] no ill-will towards anyone" (Ho Chi Minh

2011a: 256), further stating that "our foreign policy is to establish good relations with any country wishing to build diplomatic relations with us based on mutual respect, equality, and adherence to the five principles of peaceful coexistence" (Ho Chi Minh 2011d: 382).

Ho Chi Minh worked to recognize and seize international opportunities to advance Vietnam's national interests. He continuously sought cooperative opportunities and international support for Vietnam's development while remaining flexible in addressing external challenges and threats. His skillful diplomacy is evident in his engagement with international leaders during and after World War II, including his strategic timing of Vietnam's declaration of independence on September 2, 1945, amidst shifting international conditions. Ho Chi Minh pursued support from major powers like the Soviet Union, China, and the United States to strengthen Vietnam's global standing (Duiker 2000). In a letter to U.S. President Harry Truman on January 18, 1946, Ho Chi Minh wrote: "We desire U.S. support in rebuilding and developing our country while ensuring that Vietnam is protected from invasion or foreign interference" (Ho Chi Minh 1946).

Ho Chi Minh's approach to Vietnam-China-Soviet relations represents a unique and skillful model of diplomacy founded on principles of independence, autonomy, flexibility, and balanced relations. These principles enabled Vietnam to overcome past challenges and offers valuable lessons for Vietnam's contemporary international relations, particularly in balancing relations with China and the United States.

3. Vietnam–China–Soviet Relations (1945–1969)

The historical record provides evidence and a valuable lens through which to examine changes in diplomatic recognition, aid relationships, and the management of disagreements between Vietnam's external supporters.

1945–1950

Following independence, France's attempt to restore colonial rule made external recognition and assistance urgent. Ho Chi Minh's cable of 28 February 1946 appealed to President Harry S. Truman for support for Vietnamese self-determination (Ho Chi Minh 1946). The subsequent diplomatic opening to China and the Soviet Union culminated in recognition by both countries in January 1950. This shift expanded Vietnam's access to assistance while leaving the preservation of its own authority a central concern.

Ho Chi Minh's letter to Stalin of 14 October 1950 requested military and economic assistance, illustrating the practical importance of relations with Moscow alongside the Chinese channel (Ho Chi Minh 2016: 299-300). Seeking multiple sources of support was consistent with self-reliance as a diplomatic objective, even though Vietnam's wartime circumstances sharply constrained its options.

1950–1954

Ho Chi Minh's engagement with Beijing and Moscow facilitated the diversification of external support after diplomatic recognition (Nguyen Thanh Trung 2011). China became the principal logistical channel for weapons and military assistance (Nguyen Thanh Trung 2011). This support bolstered Viet Minh military capabilities but also made the relationship with China particularly consequential. At the Geneva Conference in 1954, Vietnam accepted an interim settlement while retaining independence and national reunification as its objectives,

illustrating the adjustment of tactics under international constraints (Tran Thi Minh Tuyet 2014).

1955–1963

After Geneva, North Vietnam sought economic reconstruction while U.S. involvement in the South increased; American advisers numbered approximately 16,000 by late 1963 (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum 1963). A CIA report placed cumulative economic aid in 1955–1963 at USD 956.4 million in current prices: USD 457 million from China, USD 368.9 million from the Soviet Union, and USD 130.5 million from Eastern European states (CIA 2006). The figures indicate the importance of both principal donors. Contemporary U.S. assessments also discussed Hanoi's attempts to avoid an exclusive commitment in the Sino–Soviet dispute and Ho Chi Minh's conciliatory role (Office of the Historian 1963). Together, these observations suggest considerable maneuverability within substantial external dependence.

1964–1969

U.S. escalation intensified the pressure on both Vietnam's resources and its diplomacy. Operation Rolling Thunder, from March 1965 to October 1968, dropped approximately 643,000 tons of ordnance on North Vietnam (Barrett 2025). Chinese personnel helped maintain transport routes and air defenses; a January 1968 CIA report recorded 34,000 Chinese engineer troops and 16,000 anti-aircraft personnel (CIA 2018). Soviet assistance increasingly supplied air-defense equipment. Estimated military aid in 1967 amounted to USD 660 million, with approximately 80% attributed to the Soviet Union (CIA 2019). Despite worsening Sino–Soviet relations, Hanoi continued seeking workable ties with both capitals (CIA 2016). The combination of Chinese logistical support and Soviet technical equipment reveals complementary dependencies as well as the advantages of maintaining two channels.

Across these periods, the composition of assistance changed: China predominated in the early 1950s, while Soviet economic and technical support subsequently expanded (Prybyla 1966; CIA 2005). Vietnam's experience therefore demonstrates the value of diversified support, while cautioning against equating diversification with complete independence from external constraints.

The Case of 1960: Ho Chi Minh's Mediating Role in the Sino–Soviet Rift

The Sino–Soviet rift in 1960 tested the possibility of maintaining solidarity with two increasingly antagonistic allies. Ho Chi Minh's intervention sought to protect Vietnam's access to support and preserve cooperation within the socialist camp. He met Chinese leaders in May and August 1960 and traveled to the Soviet Union during the latter visit (Do Hoang Linh 2024). A U.S. memorandum of 26 August associated his appearance in Moscow with possible preparations for renewed Sino–Soviet confrontation, while acknowledging uncertainty about its purpose (Office of the Historian 1960: 714). His subsequent conciliatory activity illustrates an effort to manage disagreement through continued access to both leaderships (You 2023).

These efforts did not resolve the underlying dispute (Grundy 2024). Nevertheless, aid continued: Moscow extended USD 200 million in credit in 1960, and its economic commitments since 1955 reached roughly USD 370 million (Office of the Historian 1965). Studies of Soviet and Chinese assistance further demonstrate the

continuing material importance of both relationships (Path 2021; Li 2019). The narrower conclusion is that Vietnam sustained access to rival supporters despite the failure of reconciliation. Continued aid should not, by itself, be treated as proof that Ho Chi Minh's mediation caused either donor's decisions.

4. Contemporary U.S.–China Competition (2000–2025)

4.1. Policy of Independence and Self-Reliance

In contemporary policy, independence and self-reliance are expressed through strategic autonomy and "bamboo diplomacy"[1] (Nguyen Khac Giang 2024). The 2019 Defense White Paper's "Four No's" rule out: (1) military alliances, (2) siding with one country against another, (3) foreign military bases or the use of Vietnamese territory against other countries, and (4) the use or threat of force in international relations (Bo Quoc Phong 2019). These commitments seek to preserve decision-making space amid U.S.–China rivalry.

Economic diversification complements these commitments. Agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), European Union–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) broaden Vietnam's market access and reduce the risks associated with exclusive reliance on one partner. In 2024, the United States was Vietnam's largest export market, with reported exports of USD 119.6 billion, while China remained its largest source of imports (VnEconomy 2025a). This pattern creates development opportunities but also exposes Vietnam to disruptions on both the demand and supply sides.

The concept of autonomy under dependence helps to interpret this position: weaker states can seek greater discretion within unequal relationships rather than escape interdependence altogether (Kassab 2015). Vietnam's transition from wartime assistance to economic integration changes the instruments through which self-reliance must be pursued.

RAND's analysis describes Vietnam's hedging through diversified strategic partnerships and economic ties (Grossman 2020). Research on Vietnam's foreign policy similarly emphasizes multilateral engagement as a means of moderating pressures from Washington and Beijing (Hoang Thi Ha 2024). This connects the contemporary search for strategic autonomy with the historical effort to combine external cooperation and independent choice.

4.2. Multilateralization and Technology Diplomacy

Diplomatic flexibility is reflected in multilateralization, diversification, and bamboo diplomacy (Yaacob 2024). Vietnam has expanded partnerships with the United States, Japan, India, and the EU while maintaining close economic and political relations with China. Cooperation across these relationships broadens its options, but the value of diversification depends on the capabilities and policy choices it enables. On the South China Sea issue, Vietnam combines participation in regional and international forums with continued dialogue with China, seeking support for its interests while managing bilateral tensions (Nguyen Anh Cuong and Hoang Van Luu 2021). This combination illustrates

[1] "Bamboo diplomacy," understood as a Vietnamese approach to foreign policy that combines firmness in core principles and national interests with flexibility, pragmatism, and diversification in external relations.

flexibility in diplomatic instruments within a continuing commitment to sovereignty. Such flexibility is consistent with hedging: institutional engagement and diversified partnerships help manage economic and security risks without requiring exclusive alignment (Kuik 2024; Lim and Mukherjee 2019). Its effectiveness depends on whether cooperation produces usable alternatives when pressures intensify. Vietnam's promotion of multilateral diplomacy provides an institutional basis for this approach (Ha Phuong 2024). Within ASEAN, participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) offers channels for consultation and regional security cooperation (Po 2023).

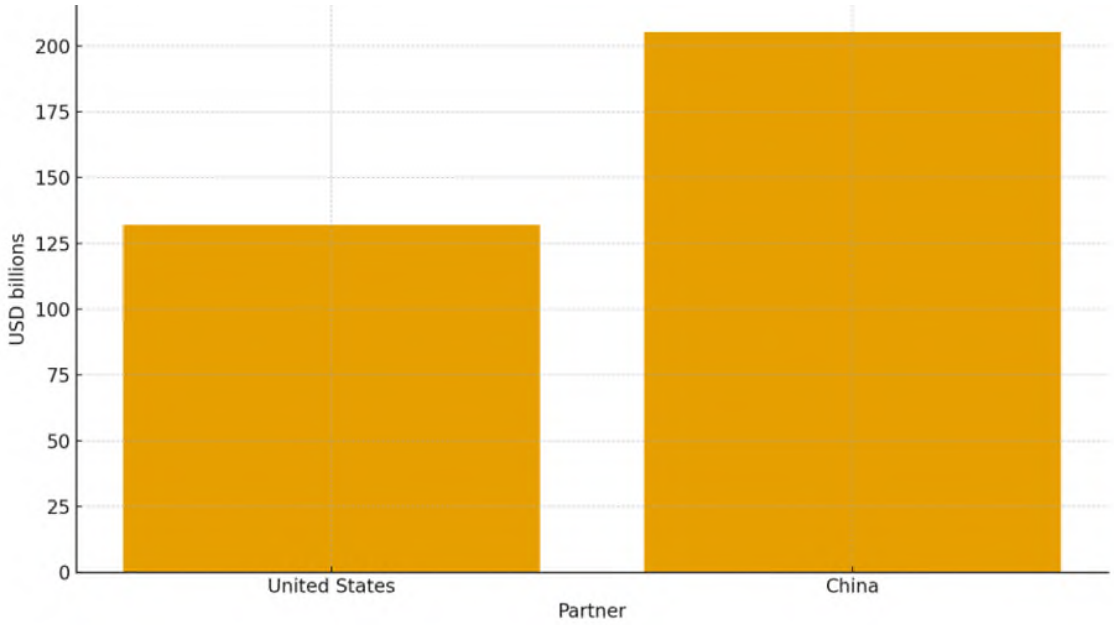
Technology partnerships extend diversification into productive capabilities. Cooperation in semiconductors, renewable energy, and digital infrastructure can support domestic upgrading, provided that Vietnamese institutions and firms can absorb knowledge and avoid dependence on a single technological ecosystem. This links diplomatic flexibility to the domestic capacity required for self-reliance.

4.3. Dynamic Balance in Vietnam–U.S. and Vietnam–China Relations

The expansion of relations with both Washington and Beijing demonstrates the contemporary effort to maintain a dynamic balance. Vietnam upgraded its U.S. partnership in 2023 while continuing to develop cooperation with China. Multilateral engagement provides additional options alongside these bilateral relationships (Grossman 2020; Hoang Thi Ha 2024). Trade, investment, and defense cooperation reveal the different functions of these relationships. Figure 1 and Table 1 summarize the economic evidence.

Trade: In 2024, Vietnam's two-way trade was approximately USD 132 billion with the United States and USD 205.2 billion with China, as reported in the sources accompanying Figure 1. The pattern of exports to the United States and production inputs from China supports manufacturing growth while exposing Vietnam to market and supply-chain disruptions.

Figure 1: *Vietnam's Two-Way Trade in 2024 (US vs. China)*



Sources: VnEconomy (2025b) for Vietnam–U.S. trade; Vietnam News (2025) for Vietnam–China trade

FDI: Table 1 reports cumulative registered investment of approximately USD 27.1 billion from mainland China and USD 12.5 billion from the United States, against a total of USD 502.8 billion at the end of 2024. These figures show that other investors remain collectively important; they do not establish the absence of dependence in particular sectors.

Table 1: *Selected FDI figures (cumulative to 31 Dec 2024)*

Investor	Cumulative FDI (USD bn)
China (mainland)	27.1
United States	12.5
Others (all remaining)	463.2

Sources: Ministry of Planning and Investment (2025) for total registered FDI; East-West Center (2025) for partner-specific stocks

Defense: U.S. cooperation includes maritime capacity-building, training, and aircraft transfers (U.S. Department of State 2025; VNS 2024). Vietnam also maintains joint patrols and defense exchanges with China (Song Anh 2024; VNA/VNS 2025). Humanitarian assistance and disaster-response cooperation offers another channel for engagement with the United States (Blow 2024). These activities serve different purposes and should not be treated as equivalent forms of security support.

The evidence points to a differentiated balance: markets, investment, and security cooperation provide distinct resources. Their combination can widen Vietnam's options, but whether it strengthens autonomy depends on domestic capabilities and the management of concentrated vulnerabilities.

5. Discussion and Policy Implications

5.1. Comparison and Integration with Theoretical Frameworks

The comparative analysis connects Ho Chi Minh's principles with three theoretical traditions in debates over small-state autonomy. Expanded soft balancing describes the combined use of domestic capabilities, multilateral institutions, and diversified partnerships to preserve strategic choice.

First, neorealism emphasizes self-help under international anarchy. Ho Chi Minh's insistence that "A nation that is not self-reliant and just waits for help from others does not deserve independence" (Ho Chi Minh 2011b: 445) similarly assigns priority to internal strength. His accompanying emphasis on effective international support (Ho Chi Minh 2011f: 185) links self-reliance to external cooperation. In contemporary conditions, this combination can support hedging without requiring a formal military alliance.

Second, neoliberal institutionalism helps to explain why institutions can reduce coordination costs and facilitate cooperation (Powell 1991). Ho Chi Minh's interest in the United Nations expressed an early commitment to international engagement (Pham Ngoc Anh 2020). Contemporary participation in ASEAN and economic agreements offers mechanisms for consultation, cooperation, and wider market access. This resembles binding engagement, although institutional participation does not remove power asymmetries (Goh 2008).

Third, the Marxist-Leninist tradition provides a language of international solidarity (Marx and Engels 1848; Nguyen Thi Que 2016). The Sino–Soviet dispute nevertheless required Vietnam to reconcile solidarity with conflicting national priorities. Ho Chi Minh's efforts to maintain relations across that division illuminate the practical management of rival partners, which can be compared with later concepts of soft balancing (Paul 2005).

The resulting framework links internal strength, institutional engagement, and diversified external ties. Table 2 maps these connections. The comparison identifies continuities in diplomatic reasoning; it does not imply that present-day arrangements reproduce wartime relationships.

The study contributes to debates on small-state agency by relating a Vietnamese diplomatic tradition to the constraints emphasized by neorealism and the opportunities offered by institutions (Acharya 2004; Ikenberry 2001; Waltz 1979). It also connects historical experience to research on Vietnam's changing combination of realist and liberal policy instruments (Tran Thi Bich and Sato 2018). This approach supports the broader effort to include regional intellectual traditions in international relations scholarship (Acharya 2014).

Table 2: *Concept map: from principles to an expanded soft-balancing posture*

Principle	International Relations Linkage	Policy Levers (2000–2025)
Independence & Self-Reliance	Neorealism–neoliberal spectrum; soft-power capital	Strategic autonomy; diversified trade/FDI; FTAs (CPTPP, EVFTA, RCEP)
Diplomatic Flexibility	Hedging as operating mechanism	ASEAN-centric multilateralism; "bamboo diplomacy;" tech partnerships
Balance of Power	Expanded soft balancing (middle-power enmeshment)	Security buffers; maritime capacity; selective binding with middle powers

Source: Synthesis based on Grossman (2020) and Hoang Thi Ha (2024).

5.2. Policy Implications

The framework supports five connected priorities in Vietnam's international relations: to diversify cooperation with middle powers (Nguyen Anh Cuong 2023; Grossman 2020); to strengthen ASEAN supply-chain cooperation (ASEAN 2024); to develop domestic technological capabilities through external partnerships (The White House 2022); to sustain public diplomacy that presents Vietnam as a reliable partner (Kim Anh 2025); and to improve maritime capacities alongside crisis-management channels (Song Anh 2024; Matsubara et al. 2012). Table 3 relates these priorities to implementation risks and possible warning indicators.

Implementation must account for the weaponization of economic interdependence, export restrictions, and limits on regional coordination (Farrell and Newman 2019). The indicators in Table 3 are proposed monitoring tools rather than empirically validated thresholds. An early-warning mechanism should connect such observations to proportionate policy responses.

Table 3: *Policy dashboard: from principles to actions*

Recommendation	Rationale	Risks	Early-Warning Indicators
Diversify middle-power tech links (JP, KR, EU, IN)	Reduce single-market exposure; boost digital self-reliance	Overdependence on one tech ecosystem; export controls	Supplier concentration >40%; policy shocks to chips/AI
Strengthen ASEAN centrality & supply-chain corridors	Multilateral buffer lowers great-power pressure	ASEAN capacity constraints; crisis coordination gaps	COC progress stalls; tariff shocks; logistics bottlenecks

Recommendation	Rationale	Risks	Early-Warning Indicators
Enhance maritime domain awareness & SAR capacity	Deterrence-by-denial in the near seas	Accidental escalation; technology maintenance burden	Harassment incidents; exclusive economic zone (EEZ) incursions; Automatic Identification System (AIS) dark targets
Reposition public diplomacy and war-legacy cooperation	Narrative legitimacy; trust-building with U.S. & partners	Domestic skepticism; politicization of aid	Funding delays; legacy-program halts or cuts
Build a whole-of-government geoeconomic early-warning cell	Translate hedging into timely risk responses	False positives; policy overreactions	Composite risk index > threshold; volatility spikes

Source: Policy synthesis; the proposed indicators are illustrative. Domestic technological capacity complements the partnership measures in the first row, while the final row supports implementation across all five priorities.

6. Conclusion

The results demonstrate that the three core principles of Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic thought—independence and self-reliance, flexibility ("holding fast to the constant while adapting to myriad changes"), and balance of power—when integrated with three major theoretical traditions of international relations, can form an "expanded soft balancing" framework that meets Vietnam's security and development needs in a period of prolonged U.S.–China competition. This study contributes on three levels: expanding the theory on the proactive role of small states within a multipolar structure; providing empirical evidence of the adaptability of selective binding engagement and soft balancing; and proposing a set of specific policy recommendations to strengthen self-reliance, expand strategic space, and maintain the principle of independence and self-reliance. The article also lays the grounds for further research by comparing hedging models in Southeast Asia, while also laying the foundation for the development of a Vietnamese "local theory" in international relations.

The five policy recommendations—diversifying middle-power cooperation, strengthening ASEAN's role, enhancing digital self-reliance, repositioning public diplomacy, and strengthening maritime security buffers—offer a feasible roadmap for Hanoi to transform the theoretical framework into actionable policies. To mitigate risks, the study also emphasizes the need for an early warning system and continuous updates to the "risk–benefit matrix" in all foreign policy decisions.

Looking to the future, Vietnam's success will depend on its ability to continue hedging strategically, aligning economic and security interests with a range of partners while strengthening its internal resources. The spirit of "independence without isolation, cooperation without antagonistic alliances" in Ho Chi Minh's thought, when creatively applied to contemporary

conditions, remains a guiding principle for navigating intensifying major-power competition.

Vietnam's experience also offers broader insights for Southeast Asia and international relations. It suggests that smaller and middle powers are not necessarily confined to choosing between competing great powers. Through diversified partnerships, regional institutions, economic integration, and the careful preservation of strategic autonomy, they can retain meaningful room for manoeuvre even under conditions of asymmetric power. More broadly, the Vietnamese case indicates that hedging is not simply a temporary response to uncertainty but can become a durable form of statecraft when it is anchored in domestic political traditions, institutional capacity, and a consistent conception of national interest. For Southeast Asia, this reinforces the continuing importance of an open and inclusive regional order in which ASEAN-centred institutions provide states with additional diplomatic space. At the wider international level, it demonstrates how states with limited material capabilities can exercise agency by combining internal resilience with flexible external alignment rather than relying exclusively on either balancing or bandwagoning. In this sense, Vietnam's trajectory illuminates how strategically adaptive states can turn systemic rivalry into opportunities for autonomy, influence, and cooperation while contributing to regional and global peace and prosperity.

Declaration of AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used OpenAI's ChatGPT to assist with language editing, including improving the clarity, coherence, and academic expression of selected passages. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed and revised by the author. The research design, interpretation of evidence, theoretical arguments, and conclusions remain the author's intellectual responsibility. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and academic integrity of the final manuscript.

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