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ASEAN Centrality and Vietnam's Strategic Autonomy: Institutional Perspectives on Sovereignty and Security

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how ASEAN's institutional centrality shapes Vietnam's capacity to preserve national security and sovereignty amid intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China. Moving beyond conventional assessments of ASEAN's institutional effectiveness, the study conceptualizes ASEAN as a strategic institutional resource that influences the policy space available to smaller states operating under conditions of great-power competition. The analysis integrates perspectives on Bamboo Diplomacy, omni-enmeshment, strategic hedging, and the "Impossible Trinity" of security, prosperity, and autonomy to develop a three-level analytical framework linking great-power rivalry, regional institutionalism, and state-level sovereignty. The findings demonstrate that ASEAN contributes to Vietnam's sovereignty preservation through three principal mechanisms: facilitating the multilateralization of maritime security concerns, providing an inclusive institutional environment for soft balancing between competing great powers, and reinforcing the normative conditions necessary for Vietnam to maintain strategic autonomy. ASEAN centrality is therefore found to enhance Vietnam's diplomatic leverage not by providing direct security guarantees, but by diversifying strategic options, increasing the political costs of coercive behavior, and preventing the regional order from becoming exclusively dominated by either Washington or Beijing. However, the study also identifies significant vulnerabilities arising from ASEAN's internal divisions and the proliferation of parallel minilateral security arrangements, including the Quad and AUKUS. These developments may weaken ASEAN's convening capacity and progressively narrow Vietnam's strategic room for maneuver. The study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that ASEAN's institutional cohesion should be understood not merely as a regional governance outcome but also as an external condition shaping Vietnam's ability to pursue sovereignty, security, and strategic autonomy simultaneously. It concludes that a resilient and central ASEAN remains an important institutional pillar supporting Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy and its long-term strategy of avoiding excessive dependence on either great power.

1. INTRODUCTION

The strategic environment of Southeast Asia has undergone significant transformation as competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China has increasingly become a defining feature of regional international relations. This competition extends beyond conventional military rivalry and encompasses economic influence, technological capabilities, diplomatic engagement, supply chain restructuring, and competing approaches to regional order. The emerging configuration has generated a complex strategic environment in which Southeast Asian states must simultaneously respond to opportunities arising from engagement with major powers and risks associated with their growing strategic confrontation. Some scholars have characterized this development as a New Cold War, particularly in view of technological bifurcation, intensifying military competition, and the increasing securitization of economic and technological relations (Nagy, 2022, p. 2). For Southeast Asian

countries, therefore, the central strategic challenge is not simply how to respond to competition between Washington and Beijing, but how to preserve national interests and strategic autonomy when the regional environment is increasingly influenced by two competing centers of power.

ASEAN occupies a particularly important position within this changing regional order. Since its establishment, ASEAN has developed an institutional framework through which Southeast Asian states seek to manage political differences, promote regional stability, and engage external powers. Its importance does not primarily derive from material capabilities or collective defense commitments. Rather, ASEAN's influence rests on its institutional legitimacy, diplomatic convening capacity, normative principles, and ability to incorporate major powers into a broader regional framework. Through ASEAN led institutions, major external powers are provided with opportunities to participate in regional affairs while Southeast Asian states retain a degree of collective agency. This institutional configuration has contributed to what has become widely known as ASEAN centrality. Nevertheless, the intensification of US China strategic competition has created increasing pressure on this regional architecture. The growing strategic divergence among ASEAN members, together with their different perceptions of China and the United States, may weaken collective cohesion and reduce the organization's capacity to act as an effective institutional buffer between competing powers (Acharya, 2017, p. 273).

The question of ASEAN's institutional position is particularly consequential for Vietnam. Vietnam is located in one of the most strategically sensitive areas of Southeast Asia and maintains extensive economic, political, and security interactions with both China and the United States. Its geographical proximity to China creates a persistent structural asymmetry, while its growing relationship with the United States provides additional opportunities for economic diversification, diplomatic cooperation, and security engagement. At the same time, Vietnam has consistently sought to avoid excessive dependence on any single major power. This strategic orientation makes the regional institutional environment especially important because Vietnam's capacity to maintain strategic autonomy is influenced not only by its own material capabilities but also by the availability of multilateral mechanisms through which it can diversify relationships and manage external pressures. In this context, ASEAN should be understood not simply as a diplomatic organization in which Vietnam participates, but as an important component of the broader strategic environment within which Vietnam seeks to protect its national security and sovereignty (Hiep, 2016, p. 272).

Vietnam's contemporary foreign policy is increasingly associated with the concept of Bamboo Diplomacy, which emphasizes the combination of strategic firmness and diplomatic flexibility. The metaphor of bamboo reflects Vietnam's ability to maintain strong roots in national interests while adapting its diplomatic behavior to changing international circumstances. Such flexibility is particularly relevant because Vietnam's foreign policy operates within a structural environment characterized by significant power asymmetry. Vietnam must defend its sovereignty and security interests while simultaneously maintaining stable relations with China, expanding cooperation with the United States, and sustaining constructive relationships with other international partners. Bamboo Diplomacy therefore represents more than a rhetorical description of Vietnamese diplomacy. It reflects a broader strategy of preserving strategic autonomy by avoiding rigid alignment, diversifying external partnerships, and maintaining multiple channels of international engagement (Vuving, 2006, p. 807; Lee, 2020).

The effectiveness of this strategic approach is closely connected to the institutional structure of the regional order. Vietnam's strategic flexibility would become considerably more difficult to sustain if Southeast Asia were divided into competing strategic blocs dominated by different major powers. A cohesive ASEAN provides Vietnam with an institutional environment in which relationships with competing powers can be pursued simultaneously without necessarily requiring exclusive alignment. ASEAN's inclusive regional architecture allows China, the United States, and other major external actors to remain engaged in regional institutions and diplomatic processes. This creates opportunities for smaller and middle powers to diversify their strategic relationships while reducing the likelihood that regional politics will be determined exclusively by bilateral power relations.

This institutional function can be further understood through the concept of omni enmeshment. Rather than seeking to exclude a major power from the regional order, omni enmeshment encourages the participation of competing powers in multiple institutional and diplomatic arrangements. Such participation can generate incentives for restraint because major powers become stakeholders in a regional environment characterized by overlapping relationships and institutional expectations (Goh, 2007, p. 113). For Vietnam, this institutional configuration creates valuable strategic space. Hanoi can strengthen relations with Washington in areas such as economic cooperation, technology, maritime security, and diplomatic coordination while

simultaneously maintaining extensive economic and political relations with Beijing. The objective is not to eliminate competition between the major powers but to prevent that competition from becoming a constraint that forces Vietnam to choose one side.

This challenge becomes particularly visible when Vietnam's security, economic development, and strategic autonomy are considered together. The intensification of US China competition places Hanoi in a situation where these objectives may reinforce one another in certain circumstances but may also generate significant tensions. Stronger security cooperation with the United States can increase Vietnam's capacity to respond to strategic pressures, particularly in relation to maritime security. At the same time, such cooperation may generate concerns in Beijing regarding Vietnam's strategic orientation. Conversely, maintaining close relations with China may help protect economic and political stability but may also create greater vulnerability arising from structural asymmetry. Vietnam must therefore seek a delicate equilibrium between security requirements, economic interests, and political independence. This dilemma corresponds closely to Kuik's concept of the Impossible Trinity, which highlights the difficulty faced by Southeast Asian states in simultaneously maximizing security, prosperity, and autonomy (Kuik, 2024, p. 1; Kuik, 2021, p. 10).

ASEAN can contribute to managing this dilemma by providing institutional alternatives to exclusive strategic alignment. The organization allows member states to engage major powers through a multilateral setting rather than relying exclusively on bilateral relationships. This is important for Vietnam because multilateral institutional engagement can reduce the relative weight of bilateral power asymmetries. Although ASEAN cannot eliminate the fundamental difference in material capabilities between Vietnam and China, it can create a broader diplomatic context in which Vietnam's interests are articulated collectively and connected to regional norms. ASEAN therefore provides a form of strategic cushioning that allows Vietnam to pursue cooperation with different external partners while maintaining its commitment to an independent foreign policy.

The South China Sea constitutes the most important arena in which this institutional function becomes apparent. Maritime sovereignty is a central component of Vietnam's national security concerns, particularly given the combination of territorial disputes, military modernization, resource competition, and growing strategic activity by major powers. A purely bilateral approach would place Vietnam in a difficult position because of the substantial asymmetry between the two sides. ASEAN provides an alternative diplomatic environment in which maritime issues can be discussed within a broader framework of regional peace, international law, freedom of navigation, and peaceful dispute settlement. Through ASEAN mechanisms, Vietnam can therefore elevate maritime security concerns from a predominantly bilateral dispute into an issue with broader regional and international implications.

The significance of this process lies in the relationship between institutional legitimacy and national sovereignty. ASEAN does not possess the military capability to directly protect Vietnam's maritime claims, nor does it function as a collective defense organization. Its contribution is instead primarily political and normative. By embedding maritime disputes within regional diplomatic processes, ASEAN can strengthen the legitimacy of sovereignty related positions and increase the political visibility of coercive behavior. The organization consequently operates as a normative multiplier for states seeking to defend their interests within an asymmetrical regional environment. For Vietnam, the ability to connect national sovereignty concerns with broader regional principles constitutes an important dimension of its strategy for managing maritime risks.

However, the strategic value of ASEAN cannot be separated from the question of institutional cohesion. ASEAN's consensus based decision making and principle of non interference have historically contributed to regional stability, but these same principles can also constrain collective responses when member states hold sharply divergent strategic preferences. The organization's internal divisions become particularly significant when individual ASEAN members develop different levels of economic dependence on China or different security relationships with the United States and other external powers. As strategic rivalry intensifies, such differences may make it increasingly difficult for ASEAN to formulate coherent positions on issues involving major power competition. The resulting institutional weakness could reduce ASEAN's ability to perform the buffering function upon which states such as Vietnam depend.

At the same time, the emergence of parallel regional security arrangements has added another layer of complexity. Initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS reflect the growing importance of minilateral cooperation in the Indo Pacific. These arrangements can contribute to regional security and provide additional mechanisms for cooperation among selected states. Nevertheless, their increasing prominence may also contribute to the fragmentation of the regional institutional architecture. If strategic cooperation increasingly shifts from ASEAN centered institutions toward smaller and more exclusive arrangements,

ASEAN may retain formal diplomatic recognition while gradually losing substantive influence over the regional security environment. Such a development would challenge the principle of ASEAN centrality and could reduce the institutional space available to Southeast Asian states to manage great power competition (Acharya, 2017, p. 278).

For Vietnam, the erosion of ASEAN centrality could have consequences extending beyond the organization itself. Vietnam's strategy of strategic autonomy depends upon the availability of multiple diplomatic and institutional channels through which external relationships can be diversified. If ASEAN becomes less capable of coordinating regional diplomacy, Vietnam may face greater pressure to rely on bilateral or minilateral security partnerships. Such a development could produce an unintended paradox. While stronger bilateral security relationships may enhance Vietnam's immediate capacity to respond to specific threats, excessive reliance on external strategic partners could simultaneously narrow its long term diplomatic autonomy. The institutional weakening of ASEAN could therefore increase the very strategic dependence that Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy seeks to avoid.

This issue is particularly relevant to Vietnam's defense policy, including the principle commonly described as the Four No's. The policy reflects Vietnam's longstanding preference for maintaining strategic independence and avoiding formal military alignment. Its effectiveness, however, depends partly upon the surrounding strategic environment. A relatively open and inclusive regional order provides greater opportunities for Vietnam to maintain a non aligned posture while strengthening practical security cooperation with multiple partners. By contrast, a highly polarized regional environment could make such a policy increasingly difficult to sustain. Under conditions of intensified great power competition, strategic ambiguity and non alignment may require greater diplomatic resources and stronger institutional support if they are to remain viable.

Against this background, this study investigates the relationship between ASEAN's institutional position and Vietnam's capacity to preserve national security sovereignty amid intensifying US China strategic rivalry. The study moves beyond the conventional assessment of ASEAN as either an effective or ineffective regional institution. Instead, it examines ASEAN centrality as an external strategic condition that can either expand or constrain the range of choices available to Vietnam. This perspective establishes a three level analytical relationship between great power rivalry, regional institutionalism, and state level sovereignty.

The central research question is therefore: How does ASEAN's institutional position influence Vietnam's capacity to preserve national security sovereignty amid intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China? Addressing this question requires attention to both the opportunities and constraints generated by regional institutionalism. The study argues that ASEAN contributes to Vietnam's sovereignty preservation through three interconnected mechanisms. First, ASEAN facilitates the multilateralization of maritime security concerns, allowing Vietnam to connect its sovereignty interests with wider regional norms and international principles. Second, ASEAN centrality creates an inclusive institutional environment through which Vietnam can pursue forms of soft balancing without becoming locked into formal strategic alignment. Third, ASEAN's institutional norms provide a political environment that supports Vietnam's efforts to preserve strategic autonomy while maintaining relations with competing major powers.

The study further argues that these benefits are conditional upon ASEAN's continued institutional relevance and cohesion. ASEAN centrality should not be treated as an automatic or permanent feature of the regional order. Its strategic value depends upon the capacity of member states to maintain sufficient unity, preserve institutional credibility, and prevent regional security governance from becoming dominated by alternative arrangements. Internal divisions and the growing importance of parallel minilateral institutions may consequently reduce the strategic value of ASEAN for states that rely heavily on institutional diversification.

The study contributes to the literature on international relations in three principal ways. First, it connects debates concerning ASEAN centrality with the strategic autonomy of an individual member state, thereby moving beyond assessments that focus exclusively on ASEAN's regional institutional performance. Second, it integrates Bamboo Diplomacy with theoretical discussions of hedging, omni enmeshment, and the strategic dilemmas confronting states located within great power competition. Third, it highlights the potential asymmetric consequences of ASEAN's institutional weakening. While all ASEAN members may be affected by declining institutional cohesion, strategically exposed states such as Vietnam may face particularly significant consequences because their security strategies depend heavily upon maintaining multiple avenues for diplomatic maneuver.

The central argument of this study is that ASEAN's institutional centrality constitutes an important enabling condition for Vietnam's strategy of sovereignty preservation. ASEAN cannot provide Vietnam with a direct security guarantee, nor can regional institutionalism eliminate the structural asymmetry between Vietnam and China. Nevertheless, a cohesive and strategically relevant ASEAN can enlarge Vietnam's diplomatic room for maneuver, strengthen the normative environment surrounding sovereignty claims, and provide opportunities for engagement with competing major powers without requiring exclusive alignment. The sustainability of Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy should therefore be understood not only in terms of Hanoi's ability to combine strategic firmness with diplomatic flexibility, but also in relation to the resilience of the regional institutional environment within which that strategy is pursued.

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study develops an integrated theoretical and methodological framework to explain how Vietnam seeks to preserve national security and sovereignty within the increasingly contested regional order shaped by strategic rivalry between the United States and China. Rather than examining great power competition, ASEAN regionalism, and Vietnam's foreign policy as separate analytical dimensions, the study treats them as mutually constitutive elements of a single strategic process. The central analytical proposition is that systemic competition among major powers creates structural pressures, ASEAN institutions mediate those pressures at the regional level, and Vietnam subsequently adapts its foreign and security policies in order to preserve strategic autonomy. This relationship can be conceptualized as a three level analytical structure connecting great power rivalry, ASEAN institutional centrality, and Vietnamese sovereignty.

At the systemic level, the study draws primarily on structural realist assumptions concerning the distribution of power and the security behavior of states. The intensification of competition between Washington and Beijing increases uncertainty and places smaller states in a structurally difficult position because their security and economic interests may simultaneously depend upon relationships with competing major powers. From this perspective, Vietnam's strategic environment cannot be understood independently of the changing distribution of power in the Indo Pacific. The rise of China, the continued strategic presence of the United States, and the growing interaction between economic and security competition have created a regional environment in which states must continuously adjust their strategies in response to changes in relative power. Structural realism therefore provides the framework for understanding the external constraints within which Vietnam formulates its security and foreign policy.

The realist perspective, however, does not by itself adequately explain why regional institutions continue to matter under conditions of intensified great power rivalry. The study therefore incorporates insights from liberal institutionalism and the literature on ASEAN centrality. From this perspective, institutions can influence the behavior of states by establishing rules, norms, expectations, and channels of diplomatic interaction. ASEAN does not possess the material capabilities required to balance a major power directly, but its institutional role can shape the environment in which major powers interact with Southeast Asian states. ASEAN centrality is consequently conceptualized in this study not simply as an institutional aspiration but as a strategic resource that can create additional diplomatic space for states with limited material capabilities.

The relationship between structural power and regional institutions is further developed through the concept of omnimeshment. Drawing on Goh's analysis, the study understands regional institutionalism as a mechanism through which major powers can be embedded within overlapping diplomatic, economic, and security relationships (Goh, 2007, p. 113). This perspective is particularly relevant to Vietnam because its strategic objective is not to exclude either the United States or China from the regional order. Instead, Vietnam seeks to maintain constructive relations with both while preventing either power from acquiring a position that would excessively constrain Vietnamese strategic autonomy. ASEAN provides an important institutional setting for such an approach because it enables major powers to participate simultaneously in regional institutions and creates opportunities for Southeast Asian states to diversify their external relationships.

The study combines this institutional perspective with the theory of strategic hedging. Hedging is understood here as a deliberate strategy through which a state avoids excessive commitment to a single strategic orientation while simultaneously preparing for adverse changes in the international environment. It is therefore neither equivalent to neutrality nor simply a compromise between balancing and bandwagoning. For Vietnam, hedging represents a rational response to uncertainty arising from the simultaneous need to maintain economic cooperation, protect national security, and preserve political autonomy. Kuik's concept of the Impossible Trinity is particularly useful in explaining this dilemma because it highlights the difficulty of

simultaneously maximizing security, prosperity, and autonomy under conditions of great power competition (Kuik, 2024, p. 1; Kuik, 2021, p. 10).

The theoretical framework consequently treats Vietnam's strategic autonomy as a relational outcome rather than an entirely domestic attribute. Vietnam's ability to preserve autonomy depends not only upon its own diplomatic and defense capabilities but also upon the availability of alternative external relationships and institutional channels. A diversified regional environment allows Hanoi to avoid excessive dependence on any single power. ASEAN centrality is therefore important because it contributes to the institutional diversification required for hedging. Conversely, if ASEAN becomes increasingly fragmented or loses its capacity to convene competing powers, Vietnam's strategic options may become narrower and the costs of maintaining autonomy may increase.

At the state level, the study employs the concept of Bamboo Diplomacy to interpret Vietnam's policy response to these structural and institutional conditions. Bamboo Diplomacy captures the combination of strategic firmness concerning sovereignty and diplomatic flexibility in managing relations with external powers. Its underlying logic is consistent with Vietnam's effort to maintain independent decision making while simultaneously expanding practical cooperation with a diverse range of partners. In this framework, Vietnam's Four No's defense policy represents an important expression of strategic autonomy, while its participation in multilateral institutions and expanded partnerships represents the flexible dimension through which Hanoi adapts to changes in the external environment. Bamboo Diplomacy is therefore treated not simply as a metaphor for Vietnamese diplomacy but as an analytical expression of how a relatively smaller state manages asymmetric relationships under conditions of uncertainty. This interpretation is consistent with Vietnam's longstanding effort to preserve strategic autonomy while maintaining diversified external relationships (Vuving, 2006, p. 807), particularly in an Asian strategic environment increasingly shaped by intensifying US China competition (Lee, 2020).

The framework also incorporates the concept of institutional balancing to explain Vietnam's participation in wider regional and international arrangements. Institutional balancing differs from conventional military balancing because it seeks to shape the behavior of powerful states through institutional rules, diplomatic coalitions, and normative mechanisms rather than relying primarily on material countervailing capabilities. Vietnam's expanding engagement with regional economic and political initiatives, including the Indo Pacific Economic Framework and its development of comprehensive strategic partnerships, can therefore be interpreted as part of a broader effort to diversify strategic relationships and influence the emerging regional order. These initiatives provide Vietnam with additional channels through which it can protect national interests while avoiding formal military alignment.

The concept of a normative power multiplier further connects ASEAN institutionalism with Vietnam's sovereignty strategy. A state such as Vietnam cannot eliminate the material asymmetry separating it from China through national capabilities alone. It can, however, seek to increase the diplomatic and normative significance of its positions by embedding them within wider regional institutions and internationally recognized principles. ASEAN can contribute to this process by providing platforms through which sovereignty, international law, peaceful dispute settlement, and regional stability can be articulated collectively. In the context of the South China Sea, this institutional function allows Vietnam to transform an essentially asymmetric bilateral problem into an issue that is embedded within broader regional debates. ASEAN consequently does not replace national security capabilities, but it can amplify the political and normative effects of Vietnam's diplomatic strategy.

The theoretical framework therefore brings together four analytical dimensions. The first is structural competition, which identifies the distribution of power and the intensification of US China rivalry as the principal external source of strategic uncertainty. The second is regional institutionalism, which examines how ASEAN centrality, norms, and diplomatic mechanisms mediate the effects of great power competition. The third is strategic autonomy, which focuses on Vietnam's efforts to preserve independent decision making while maintaining economic and security relationships with competing powers. The fourth is sovereignty preservation, which constitutes the principal state level outcome reflected in Vietnam's maritime security policy, diplomatic behavior, and defense posture.

The relationship among these dimensions is not assumed to be linear. Instead, the study conceptualizes it as a dynamic process in which changes at one level can generate consequences at the other levels. Intensifying great power rivalry may increase the importance of ASEAN centrality, while simultaneously making ASEAN consensus more difficult to achieve. Stronger ASEAN cohesion can expand Vietnam's strategic options, whereas institutional fragmentation can increase the pressure on Vietnam to

rely upon bilateral or minilateral security arrangements. Similarly, Vietnam's external partnerships can strengthen its autonomy in one domain while potentially generating strategic dependence in another. This dialectical relationship is essential for understanding why Vietnam's foreign policy cannot be adequately explained through a single theory or a simple balancing model.

On this theoretical basis, the study adopts a qualitative research methodology combining conceptual analysis, historical analysis, and interpretive analysis of Vietnam's foreign and security policy. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to explain strategic behavior, institutional processes, and changing patterns of diplomatic interaction rather than estimate a statistical relationship between predetermined variables. The analysis focuses on the relationship between changes in the regional strategic environment, the evolution of ASEAN's institutional role, and Vietnam's corresponding policy responses.

The research draws upon interdisciplinary insights from international relations, political science, and contemporary diplomatic history. Structural realist assumptions are used to identify the constraints generated by changes in relative power and great power competition. Institutional and constructivist perspectives are employed to examine the role of ASEAN norms, diplomatic practices, regional identity, and institutional legitimacy. The integration of these perspectives allows the study to examine both material and ideational dimensions of Vietnam's security strategy. Material power explains the structural pressures confronting Vietnam, while institutions, norms, and diplomatic practices help explain how Hanoi interprets and manages those pressures.

The empirical analysis is based on the systematic examination and synthesis of relevant scholarly literature, policy documents, official statements, institutional materials, and historical developments concerning ASEAN, Vietnam, the United States, and China. Particular attention is given to developments relating to ASEAN centrality, South China Sea security, Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy, the Four No's defense policy, strategic partnerships, and the emergence of alternative regional arrangements such as the Quad and AUKUS. The historical dimension is used to identify patterns of continuity and change in Vietnam's strategic behavior and to assess how its institutional strategies have evolved in response to transformations in the regional balance of power.

Methodologically, the study proceeds through three interconnected analytical stages. The first examines the structural context generated by US China strategic rivalry and identifies the principal pressures confronting Vietnam. The second evaluates ASEAN's institutional capacity to mediate these pressures, with particular attention to centrality, cohesion, inclusiveness, and normative influence. The third examines Vietnam's policy responses and assesses how ASEAN's institutional position affects the strategic space available for Bamboo Diplomacy, hedging, and sovereignty preservation. This analytical sequence allows the study to connect systemic developments with regional institutional processes and state level outcomes.

The study does not assume that ASEAN automatically protects the interests of its member states. Instead, ASEAN's strategic value is treated as conditional upon its institutional cohesion, diplomatic relevance, and ability to maintain centrality in the evolving regional order. This assumption is particularly important in light of the emergence of parallel minilateral arrangements and the growing divergence among ASEAN members. The methodology therefore examines both the enabling and constraining effects of ASEAN institutions. It considers how ASEAN can provide strategic opportunities for Vietnam while also recognizing the limitations imposed by consensus based decision making, divergent member state interests, and the absence of collective defense mechanisms.

The integrated theoretical and methodological framework leads to a central analytical proposition. Vietnam's ability to preserve sovereignty under conditions of US China strategic rivalry depends not only upon national capabilities and bilateral diplomacy but also upon the resilience of the regional institutional environment. ASEAN functions as a strategic intermediary between systemic power competition and Vietnam's state level security choices. When ASEAN remains cohesive and central, Vietnam possesses greater opportunities to diversify partnerships, internationalize sovereignty concerns, and maintain strategic autonomy. When ASEAN centrality weakens, the institutional space available for hedging becomes narrower and the structural pressure exerted by major power competition becomes more difficult to manage.

Accordingly, the study conceptualizes ASEAN centrality as a form of strategic enabling condition rather than a direct security guarantee. Its significance lies in its ability to enlarge the range of choices available to Vietnam and reduce the extent to which bilateral power asymmetries determine national security outcomes. This approach provides the analytical basis for assessing

whether the continued strength of ASEAN institutions can remain an important component of Vietnam's sovereignty preservation strategy in an increasingly polarized Indo Pacific regional order.

3. US PRC STRATEGIC RIVALRY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF ASEAN'S REGIONAL ROLE

The intensification of strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China has fundamentally altered the strategic environment in which ASEAN operates. Rather than simply generating additional security risks, the rivalry has simultaneously increased the geopolitical relevance of ASEAN and exposed the institutional limitations of the organization. This dual effect constitutes one of the central paradoxes of contemporary Southeast Asian regionalism. As competition between Washington and Beijing becomes more pronounced, both powers have greater incentives to engage with ASEAN and publicly affirm its centrality. At the same time, their divergent strategic interests increasingly penetrate the political, economic, and security preferences of ASEAN member states, making collective action more difficult. ASEAN consequently finds itself in a position in which its strategic importance is increasing while its institutional capacity to manage the forces underlying that importance is being progressively tested.

The rise in ASEAN's diplomatic significance is partly attributable to the strategic importance attached to Southeast Asia by both major powers. The United States views the region as an essential component of its Indo Pacific strategy, while China regards Southeast Asia as critical to its economic connectivity, maritime security, and broader regional influence. Both powers therefore have incentives to maintain relations with ASEAN and to recognize the organization's central role in regional diplomacy. As Acharya (2017, p. 275) observes, the strategic competition between major powers has reinforced the rhetorical commitment of both Washington and Beijing to ASEAN centrality. This development provides ASEAN with an important diplomatic opportunity. Rather than becoming merely an arena in which major powers compete, ASEAN can potentially use their mutual dependence on regional engagement to preserve its institutional relevance.

The economic dimension of great power rivalry further reinforces this opportunity. The expansion of Chinese investment under the Belt and Road Initiative and the increased economic and strategic engagement of the United States have generated new opportunities for infrastructure development, investment, technology transfer, trade diversification, and supply chain restructuring. The competition for influence therefore provides ASEAN member states with greater access to external resources than might otherwise be available. Shambaugh (2021) argues that Southeast Asia has consequently become an important strategic arena in which major powers compete for influence. For ASEAN states, this competition can create opportunities for economic development and diplomatic diversification, provided that they retain sufficient autonomy to avoid excessive dependence on either side.

The benefits generated by great power competition, however, coexist with substantial institutional risks. The same rivalry that increases ASEAN's strategic value also creates divergent preferences among its members. Different levels of economic dependence on China, varying perceptions of security threats, and contrasting relationships with the United States have produced increasingly visible differences within the organization. Mainland Southeast Asian states such as Laos and Cambodia have generally maintained particularly close economic and political relations with China, whereas countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines have become increasingly concerned about maritime security and China's growing regional assertiveness. These differences complicate ASEAN's consensus based decision making and make it difficult for the organization to formulate strong collective responses to politically sensitive issues.

The 2012 ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Phnom Penh illustrates the institutional consequences of such divisions. The failure to issue a joint communiqué demonstrated that internal disagreement could prevent ASEAN from articulating a common position even when an issue had significant implications for regional security. The episode was important not simply because of the immediate diplomatic disagreement, but because it exposed a structural weakness within the ASEAN Way. Consensus can protect the interests of individual member states and prevent open confrontation, yet the same principle can become a constraint when rapid and coordinated responses are required. Great power competition therefore creates a fundamental tension between ASEAN's traditional emphasis on consensus and the increasing strategic demand for collective institutional action.

This tension can be examined through four closely interconnected dimensions: regional stability, ASEAN centrality, strategic hedging, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific. These dimensions demonstrate that the consequences of US China

rivalry cannot be reduced to either opportunities or threats. Rather, the rivalry simultaneously increases the strategic relevance of ASEAN and places pressure on the institutional foundations upon which that relevance depends.

In terms of regional stability, increased involvement by the United States and China has generated greater diplomatic attention and substantial economic resources for Southeast Asia. The American strategic reorientation toward Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative have contributed to expanded infrastructure development, investment, trade, and strategic connectivity. Yet increased external involvement also creates the possibility of strategic entrapment. ASEAN member states could be indirectly drawn into conflicts involving major power interests, particularly in relation to Taiwan and the South China Sea. A military confrontation between the United States and China would have consequences extending far beyond the immediate areas of conflict and could transform Southeast Asia from a region attempting to manage great power rivalry into one of its principal theatres.

The possibility of such entrapment has direct implications for ASEAN centrality. ASEAN has historically derived much of its influence from its capacity to bring states with different interests into a common institutional setting. ASEAN led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus have provided platforms through which major powers can interact within an inclusive regional framework. The continued relevance of these mechanisms depends, however, upon the willingness of major powers to engage with ASEAN and upon ASEAN's own ability to maintain sufficient internal coherence.

This second condition has become increasingly difficult to guarantee because of the expansion of minilateralism. The Quad, involving the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, and AUKUS, involving Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, demonstrate that states increasingly seek more focused arrangements for addressing strategic and security challenges. These mechanisms are not necessarily substitutes for ASEAN and should not automatically be interpreted as attempts to marginalize the organization. Nevertheless, their growing importance illustrates a structural shift in regional security governance. When major powers consider ASEAN decision making too slow or constrained by consensus, they possess strong incentives to rely upon smaller arrangements that allow faster coordination. The expansion of such arrangements may consequently reduce ASEAN's relative influence even while its formal centrality remains recognized.

Strategic hedging represents another area in which the consequences of US China rivalry have become increasingly visible. For many Southeast Asian states, hedging has provided a mechanism for obtaining economic, technological, and security benefits from competing powers without committing exclusively to either side. This strategy has historically been possible because economic interdependence and security competition could coexist within a relatively open regional environment. Kuik (2024, p. 1) conceptualizes hedging as a rational response through which smaller states seek to manage uncertainty while simultaneously pursuing security, prosperity, and autonomy.

The strategic environment supporting such behavior is now becoming more constrained. The growing securitization of technology, investment, supply chains, and critical infrastructure means that economic choices increasingly have security implications. The emergence of competing technological ecosystems, particularly in areas such as telecommunications and digital infrastructure, places additional pressure on ASEAN states to make choices that previously could have remained ambiguous. The expansion of the US led Indo Pacific Economic Framework and China's Belt and Road Initiative illustrates how economic initiatives are increasingly embedded within broader geopolitical competition. If this process of strategic bifurcation continues, the room for ASEAN states to maintain flexible positions may gradually diminish.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific represents ASEAN's principal institutional response to these developments. The AOIP seeks to preserve an inclusive conception of regional cooperation based on dialogue, openness, and ASEAN centrality. Its significance lies partly in its ability to engage with the broader Indo Pacific strategic discourse without formally transforming ASEAN into an instrument of containment against China. This provides member states with a framework for participating in the evolving regional order while avoiding explicit strategic alignment.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the AOIP depends upon ASEAN's capacity to translate normative principles into coordinated institutional behavior. If member states remain divided over China's maritime activities or over the appropriate degree of engagement with the United States, the AOIP risks becoming primarily declaratory. Its normative language may remain influential, but its capacity to shape strategic outcomes would be limited. ASEAN's central challenge is therefore not the absence of a regional vision but the difficulty of generating sufficient political cohesion to operationalize that vision.

The broader implication is that US China rivalry has transformed ASEAN into both a strategic beneficiary and a strategic vulnerability. The organization is more important to the regional order precisely because great power competition has intensified. Yet the same competition increases the political divisions that make collective action more difficult. ASEAN therefore faces a structural dilemma. Its members have incentives to preserve the organization as an inclusive regional institution, but they also have incentives to develop bilateral and minilateral relationships when ASEAN mechanisms appear unable to respond effectively to urgent security challenges.

The future of ASEAN centrality will consequently depend upon its ability to preserve institutional relevance under conditions of increasing strategic polarization. If ASEAN remains sufficiently cohesive, competition between Washington and Beijing can potentially be converted into diplomatic leverage for Southeast Asian states. If internal divisions become too severe, however, the same competition could accelerate institutional fragmentation. The distinction between these two trajectories is particularly important for Vietnam because its strategic autonomy depends heavily upon maintaining a regional environment in which alternative diplomatic and institutional channels remain available.

4. ASEAN CENTRALITY AND VIETNAM'S SOVEREIGNTY PRESERVATION STRATEGY

For Vietnam, ASEAN's institutional position has implications that extend beyond regional cooperation and diplomatic convenience. It directly affects the strategic environment in which Vietnam seeks to protect national security and sovereignty. Vietnam faces a particularly complex combination of geographic proximity to China, maritime disputes in the South China Sea, expanding strategic cooperation with the United States, and deep economic interdependence with both major powers. Under these circumstances, ASEAN provides an institutional environment that can partially compensate for the structural limitations associated with Vietnam's relatively smaller material capabilities.

The relationship between ASEAN centrality and Vietnamese sovereignty can be understood through three principal mechanisms: the internationalization of sovereignty disputes, institutional soft balancing, and the preservation of strategic and political autonomy.

First, ASEAN provides Vietnam with an important normative and diplomatic mechanism for internationalizing maritime security concerns. Bilateral negotiations with China take place within a significant asymmetry of material capabilities. By placing maritime disputes within ASEAN led discussions, Vietnam can connect its national sovereignty concerns to wider questions of regional stability, international law, and the rules governing maritime conduct. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific and the negotiations surrounding the Code of Conduct provide institutional channels through which Vietnam can prevent maritime disputes from being framed exclusively as bilateral disagreements.

The importance of this strategy lies in the transformation of the diplomatic context surrounding the dispute. Vietnam cannot eliminate the material imbalance between itself and China, but it can attempt to reduce the political consequences of that imbalance by broadening the institutional environment in which the dispute is discussed. ASEAN consequently functions as a normative shield. Its value derives from its capacity to embed Vietnam's sovereignty concerns within a broader regional discourse rather than leaving Hanoi to manage the issue entirely through bilateral diplomacy. Hiep's observation that diplomacy constitutes Vietnam's first and last line of defence is particularly relevant in this context because the effectiveness of diplomacy increases when national positions can be articulated through broader multilateral institutions.

The second mechanism concerns soft balancing. Vietnam does not possess the military resources required to directly counter China through conventional balancing, nor does it seek a formal military alliance with the United States. Instead, Hanoi has increasingly utilized multilateral institutions to broaden the number of external actors with interests in regional stability. ASEAN led mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus provide opportunities for Vietnam to involve the United States, Japan, Australia, India, and other major powers in the regional security architecture. This institutional pattern corresponds with Goh's concept of omni enmeshment, in which major powers are incorporated into overlapping regional relationships rather than excluded from the regional order (Goh, 2007, p. 113).

The strategic significance of this approach is indirect but important. Vietnam does not necessarily seek to construct an anti China coalition. Instead, it seeks to ensure that China is not the only major power capable of shaping the strategic environment surrounding Vietnam. The participation of multiple external powers in ASEAN centered institutions creates a more complex distribution of regional interests. This can increase the political costs associated with unilateral coercion and provide Vietnam with additional diplomatic resources when managing maritime disputes.

Third, ASEAN contributes to Vietnam's ability to preserve political and strategic autonomy. The ASEAN Way, particularly its emphasis on sovereignty and non interference, provides an institutional environment in which Vietnam can cooperate with external partners without being subjected to the same political conditionality that may accompany some forms of Western engagement. This does not mean that ASEAN provides unconditional protection for Vietnam's domestic political system. Rather, ASEAN's institutional norms create a regional diplomatic environment in which political differences do not necessarily prevent cooperation in areas of common interest.

This dimension is significant because Vietnam's security strategy involves managing two different forms of vulnerability. The first is external vulnerability associated with China's material superiority and maritime assertiveness. The second is strategic vulnerability that could emerge if Vietnam became excessively dependent upon another major power for its security. ASEAN helps mitigate the second form of vulnerability by providing a multilateral environment in which Vietnam can diversify partnerships while maintaining its commitment to strategic autonomy.

The relationship between ASEAN centrality and Vietnamese sovereignty becomes particularly evident when the consequences of institutional weakening are considered. If ASEAN loses cohesion and its ability to generate collective positions weakens, Vietnam loses an important mechanism for internationalizing maritime security concerns. Shambaugh (2021) identifies the weakening of ASEAN's regional role as an important challenge for strategic stability in Southeast Asia, while Storey (2012) highlights the difficulties created by ASEAN's internal divisions in addressing the South China Sea disputes. For Vietnam, the weakening of ASEAN therefore has consequences that extend well beyond a simple decline in regional institutional effectiveness.

The prolonged difficulties surrounding the Code of Conduct illustrate this problem. The absence of sufficiently strong and coordinated regional mechanisms can create greater opportunities for unilateral behavior and gray zone activities. Chap (2023) highlights the significance of gray zone tactics in the South China Sea, while Tran (2022) emphasizes the increasing burden placed upon maritime law enforcement when regional mechanisms are unable to generate effective deterrence. The problem is therefore cumulative. When ASEAN cannot generate a sufficiently clear collective response, individual states must rely increasingly upon their own national capabilities and bilateral partnerships.

Economic divisions within ASEAN further complicate this institutional challenge. China's economic influence, including through the Belt and Road Initiative, creates differentiated interests among member states, demonstrates how economic leverage can affect regional political preferences. States with greater dependence on Chinese investment and trade may be less willing to support positions that could generate tension with Beijing. Under such circumstances, consensus becomes not merely a procedural principle but a potential source of institutional constraint. The analysis therefore suggests that ASEAN's vulnerability is rooted not simply in external pressure but also in the interaction between economic interdependence and divergent strategic preferences.

The consequences for Vietnam would be particularly significant if ASEAN ceased to function as an effective regional intermediary. Without a credible ASEAN centered diplomatic environment, Vietnam could face stronger incentives to rely upon bilateral or minilateral security relationships. Such relationships may provide important capabilities, but they could also create new strategic dilemmas. Greater dependence upon external security partners could strengthen Vietnam's immediate deterrence capacity while simultaneously increasing China's perception that Vietnam is moving toward strategic alignment. This could reduce rather than expand Vietnam's strategic flexibility.

Conversely, a cohesive and strategically relevant ASEAN can function as a power multiplier for Vietnam. Stromseth (2019) emphasizes the strategic importance of ASEAN for maintaining regional balance, while Storey (2022) highlights the role of ASEAN led institutions in providing broader security engagement. Through mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit and ADMM Plus, Vietnam can bring the interests of multiple major powers into the regional security environment. This creates a multilayered institutional structure in which Vietnam is not required to manage all strategic pressures through bilateral relations alone.

ASEAN's economic integration also contributes to Vietnam's strategic autonomy. The development of the ASEAN Economic Community and the implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership have strengthened Southeast Asia's role in global production and trade networks. The World Economic Forum (2025) identifies ASEAN's growing importance as a global manufacturing and investment hub. For Vietnam, deeper regional economic integration provides opportunities to

diversify export markets, attract investment, restructure supply chains, and reduce excessive dependence on any individual economic partner. Economic integration therefore has a direct relationship with national security because economic diversification increases the resilience of the state under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty.

The relationship between economic and security autonomy is particularly important in the context of US China competition. A state that is excessively dependent upon a single market, investment source, technology provider, or supply chain may have fewer strategic choices during periods of geopolitical crisis. ASEAN integration provides Vietnam with an additional layer of economic resilience. This does not eliminate dependence on major economies, but it can distribute the risks associated with such dependence across a wider regional network.

The potential completion of negotiations on the Code of Conduct therefore has significance beyond the immediate management of maritime disputes. It would contribute to the broader institutionalization of regional rules and strengthen ASEAN's capacity to manage strategic competition. For Vietnam, such institutionalization is consistent with the principle of protecting national interests early and from afar because it seeks to address structural sources of insecurity before they develop into direct military confrontation (Chap, 2023).

The future relationship between US China competition and Vietnam's strategic autonomy can be conceptualized through alternative regional trajectories. If competition escalates toward an increasingly polarized confrontation, ASEAN may experience stronger centrifugal forces. Member states could become increasingly divided according to their security and economic preferences, while major powers may rely more heavily upon exclusive or semi exclusive strategic arrangements. Under this scenario, Vietnam would face a narrower strategic space. Its Four No's defense policy could become more difficult to sustain because the distinction between strategic autonomy and strategic alignment would become increasingly difficult to maintain.

Such an outcome would not necessarily force Vietnam immediately into formal alignment with either Washington or Beijing. More likely, it would increase the costs associated with remaining strategically autonomous. Vietnam would have to invest more heavily in national defense, strengthen bilateral partnerships, and manage more complex diplomatic relations while simultaneously attempting to avoid escalation with China. Strategic autonomy would therefore remain a policy objective, but the institutional environment supporting it would become significantly less favorable.

A different trajectory would emerge if US China competition remained intense but manageable. Under conditions of competitive coexistence, ASEAN could continue to serve as a regional institutional anchor and preserve opportunities for strategic diversification. Acharya (2017, p. 273) emphasizes the importance of ASEAN centrality as a mechanism for maintaining an inclusive regional order. From this perspective, competition between major powers does not necessarily undermine ASEAN. Under certain conditions, it may actually strengthen ASEAN's relevance because both sides have incentives to maintain access to its institutions.

Such an environment would be particularly advantageous for Vietnam. Hanoi could continue to strengthen strategic cooperation with the United States, Japan, Australia, India, and other partners while simultaneously maintaining economic and diplomatic relations with China. Vietnam's objective would not be to choose between the two major powers but to ensure that its relationship with each remains compatible with its broader national interests. This approach corresponds to the logic of Bamboo Diplomacy, in which firmness concerning sovereignty is combined with flexibility in external relations.

Vietnam has increasingly complemented its reliance on ASEAN with a more proactive strategy of external diversification. Rather than depending entirely upon ASEAN mechanisms, Hanoi has sought to shape the regional environment through expanded strategic partnerships and higher levels of diplomatic engagement. The upgrading of relations with major powers such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and India provides Vietnam with additional diplomatic, technological, economic, and security resources. These relationships can also contribute to maritime surveillance, coast guard capacity, technological development, and defense modernization (White House, 2022).

At the same time, Vietnam has continued to strengthen its internal balancing capacity. Modernization of national defense capabilities provides an additional layer of protection against strategic uncertainty and reduces excessive dependence upon external security partners. This approach demonstrates that Vietnam's strategy cannot be reduced to reliance on ASEAN or external balancing alone. Instead, Hanoi is pursuing a multilayered strategy combining national capacity building, diplomatic

diversification, multilateral engagement, and ASEAN institutionalism. Chap (2023) similarly emphasizes the importance of combining internal strengthening with the diversification of external strategic relationships.

The resulting pattern can be understood as a form of calibrated strategic autonomy. Vietnam seeks to maximize the benefits available from competing external powers while minimizing the risks associated with excessive dependence upon any one of them. ASEAN is central to this strategy because it provides the institutional environment within which such diversification remains possible. Vietnam's strategic autonomy is therefore not simply a product of its own policy choices. It is partly dependent upon the structure and resilience of the regional order.

The analysis consequently suggests that Vietnam's strategic autonomy is strongest under conditions in which US China competition remains substantial but does not completely destroy ASEAN's institutional space. Excessive cooperation between the major powers could theoretically reduce strategic competition, but it could also limit the bargaining opportunities available to smaller states. Conversely, uncontrolled confrontation could divide ASEAN and force smaller states into increasingly difficult choices. The most favorable environment for Vietnam is therefore one in which competition remains sufficiently balanced to prevent domination by either major power while ASEAN retains enough cohesion to mediate their interaction.

This finding has an important implication for the interpretation of Bamboo Diplomacy. Bamboo Diplomacy should not be understood solely as an expression of Vietnam's diplomatic flexibility. Its effectiveness is partly conditioned by the existence of a regional institutional environment that allows such flexibility to be exercised. A flexible foreign policy requires strategic alternatives, and strategic alternatives become more difficult to maintain when regional institutions fragment. ASEAN centrality therefore constitutes an important external enabling condition for the continued effectiveness of Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy.

The overall relationship can thus be conceptualized as follows. US China strategic rivalry constitutes the primary source of systemic pressure. ASEAN functions as an institutional intermediary that can either absorb, moderate, or amplify those pressures depending upon its cohesion and centrality. Vietnam then responds through a combination of Bamboo Diplomacy, strategic hedging, institutional balancing, national defense modernization, and diversified partnerships. The final outcome in terms of sovereignty preservation depends not on any single element but on the interaction among all three levels.

The analysis ultimately demonstrates that ASEAN's importance to Vietnam is neither symbolic nor merely diplomatic. Its institutional centrality contributes to Vietnam's strategic depth by providing mechanisms for multilateralizing sovereignty disputes, diversifying external partnerships, strengthening normative legitimacy, and reducing the consequences of bilateral power asymmetry. At the same time, ASEAN cannot substitute for Vietnam's own national capabilities. Its value is greatest when regional institutions and national strategies reinforce one another.

For this reason, the preservation of ASEAN centrality should be regarded as a strategic interest of Vietnam rather than simply a regional institutional preference. A cohesive ASEAN allows Vietnam to pursue strategic autonomy without abandoning cooperation with major powers. A fragmented ASEAN, by contrast, increases the probability that Vietnam will face strategic choices through increasingly bilateral and polarized channels. The future effectiveness of Vietnam's Four No's policy and Bamboo Diplomacy will therefore depend not only on Hanoi's diplomatic skill and national capabilities, but also on whether ASEAN remains sufficiently unified and institutionally relevant to preserve the strategic space within which Vietnam can exercise autonomous decision making.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that ASEAN's institutional position constitutes an important external condition shaping Vietnam's capacity to preserve national security, sovereignty, and strategic autonomy amid intensifying US PRC strategic rivalry. Rather than functioning merely as a conventional regional organization, ASEAN provides Vietnam with an institutional environment through which the constraints of asymmetric power can be moderated and strategic options can be diversified. Its significance therefore lies not primarily in its capacity to provide direct security guarantees, but in its ability to create diplomatic space, reinforce regional norms, and prevent the regional order from becoming excessively dominated by any single great power. In this sense, ASEAN can be understood as both a strategic buffer and a normative multiplier for Vietnam's sovereignty preservation strategy.

Three principal conclusions emerge from the analysis. First, US PRC strategic rivalry represents both the principal source of strategic uncertainty and an important catalyst for the continuing transformation of ASEAN's regional role. Intensifying competition between Washington and Beijing increases pressure on ASEAN member states to make difficult choices concerning security, economic interdependence, technology, and strategic alignment. At the same time, precisely because Southeast Asia has become an increasingly important arena of great power competition, the strategic value of an inclusive and ASEAN centered regional architecture has increased. ASEAN therefore occupies a paradoxical position. The rivalry strengthens the demand for ASEAN centrality while simultaneously exposing the institutional weaknesses that may undermine it. Maintaining ASEAN cohesion is consequently not simply a matter of organizational effectiveness. It is increasingly a question of regional strategic stability.

Second, Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy and its Four No's defense policy are closely connected to the availability of an inclusive regional institutional environment. The effectiveness of Vietnam's flexible and diversified foreign policy depends partly on its ability to avoid transforming bilateral strategic relationships into exclusive alignments. ASEAN provides an important institutional context for this approach by allowing Vietnam to deepen relations with major powers while presenting such engagement as part of a broader regional framework rather than as participation in a bloc directed against another state. Through ASEAN led mechanisms and wider regional institutions, Vietnam can engage simultaneously with the United States, China, Japan, India, Australia, and other partners while retaining a degree of strategic flexibility. Consequently, ASEAN centrality expands the diplomatic space within which Bamboo Diplomacy can operate. If this institutional space were to weaken substantially, Vietnam would face greater pressure to manage its security interests through direct bilateral balancing, thereby increasing the risks associated with strategic dependence and geopolitical polarization.

Third, the study reinforces the analytical relevance of the Impossible Trinity of security, prosperity, and autonomy to understanding Vietnam's strategic behavior. These three objectives cannot always be maximized simultaneously under conditions of great power rivalry. ASEAN provides an institutional mechanism through which their tensions can be managed rather than eliminated. Regional economic integration, diversified trade and investment relationships, and participation in ASEAN led economic arrangements contribute to Vietnam's prosperity, while regional security institutions broaden its security partnerships. At the same time, ASEAN's principles of inclusiveness, consensus, and strategic autonomy provide political space for Vietnam to avoid excessive dependence on either Washington or Beijing. Vietnam's expanding strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, India, Australia, and other countries should therefore be understood not simply as bilateral alignment strategies, but as components of a broader effort to diversify external relationships while preserving strategic autonomy within an ASEAN centered regional order.

The analysis also reveals an important conditional relationship between ASEAN cohesion and Vietnam's sovereignty preservation. A strong and cohesive ASEAN does not automatically guarantee Vietnam's security. However, a fragmented or strategically marginalized ASEAN would significantly narrow the range of choices available to Vietnam. If US PRC competition develops into sustained confrontation and regional states become increasingly divided into competing strategic blocs, ASEAN's capacity for collective action and institutional mediation may deteriorate. Under such circumstances, Vietnam would face stronger pressures to choose between competing security and economic networks, making the simultaneous pursuit of security, prosperity, and autonomy considerably more difficult. The weakening of ASEAN centrality would therefore increase the strategic costs of Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy and could place greater pressure on the Four No's defense policy.

Conversely, an ASEAN that remains cohesive, inclusive, and institutionally relevant can provide Vietnam with strategic depth. Such strategic depth does not refer only to geographical or military considerations. It encompasses diplomatic space, institutional legitimacy, economic diversification, normative support, and opportunities for engagement with multiple external powers. This institutional environment enables Vietnam to strengthen its national capabilities while avoiding unnecessary polarization. Under conditions of managed strategic competition, Vietnam can continue to deepen cooperation with the United States and other partners in areas such as technology, maritime security, economic resilience, and capacity building, while simultaneously maintaining stable economic and diplomatic relations with China. ASEAN centrality thus enables strategic diversification without necessarily requiring formal alliance formation.

The study makes a broader theoretical contribution by positioning ASEAN centrality as an external enabling condition for the strategic autonomy of a smaller state. Conventional approaches to regional institutionalism often evaluate ASEAN in terms of its effectiveness in conflict management, economic integration, or regional community building. The present analysis suggests

that its significance should also be assessed in relation to the strategic choices available to individual member states operating under conditions of asymmetric power. From this perspective, ASEAN's institutional cohesion has consequences beyond regional governance. It directly influences the strategic room for maneuver available to states such as Vietnam. ASEAN centrality therefore represents not only an institutional outcome but also a strategic resource for smaller states seeking to preserve autonomy amid great power competition.

For Vietnam, the central policy implication is clear. Preserving national sovereignty requires not only strengthening domestic economic, technological, diplomatic, and defense capabilities, but also investing actively in the resilience of the regional institutional environment in which those capabilities are exercised. Vietnam should therefore continue to play a proactive role in strengthening ASEAN unity, reinforcing ASEAN centrality, promoting practical cooperation among member states, and supporting inclusive regional mechanisms capable of engaging all major powers. At the same time, Vietnam should continue diversifying strategic partnerships while avoiding excessive dependence on any single external power. Such an approach would allow Vietnam to combine internal strengthening with external diversification and regional institutional balancing.

Ultimately, the preservation of Vietnamese sovereignty cannot be separated from the broader institutional configuration of Southeast Asia. ASEAN cannot substitute for national power, nor can it eliminate the structural pressures generated by US PRC strategic rivalry. Its value lies instead in its capacity to shape the environment within which Vietnam exercises its national power and makes strategic choices. A resilient ASEAN can enlarge Vietnam's strategic space, strengthen the political and normative costs of coercive behavior, and provide institutional opportunities for diversified engagement. A fragmented ASEAN would have the opposite effect. The long term strategic challenge for Hanoi is therefore not simply to respond to great power rivalry, but to contribute actively to maintaining a regional order in which strategic autonomy remains possible. In this respect, strengthening ASEAN unity and centrality should be regarded as an integral component of Vietnam's broader strategy for preserving sovereignty, national security, and independent decision making in an increasingly contested regional order.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Tran Hoang Long: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing-Review & Editing, Formal Analysis.

Nguyen Thi Doan: Methodology, Laboratory Analysis, Data Curation, Supervision.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Ethical approval was not required for this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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