

A constructivist approach to Vietnam strategy amid U.S. – China geoeconomic rivalry: The case of BRI and IPEF

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The critical position of Southeast Asia in general and Vietnam in particular makes them the main “battlefield” of the U.S. – China influence rivalry in the Southeast Asia region. The balancing approach of Vietnam to the superpower rivalry, especially in the context of the United States and China’s geo-economic rivalry in the region, is usually considered the “walking in the tightrope”. The approach of Vietnam is considered a balancing strategy to leverage the benefit from as well as to serve as a hedging strategy to counter any risk from both powers. However, this explanation does not capture the dynamic behind this strategy. Moreover, the ambiguous motivation such as “national interest” is not sufficient in elaborating the dynamic in Vietnam’s unique foreign policy dynamic. As a result, this paper focuses on investigating what is the momentum of Vietnamese strategy through the case of rivalry between China and the United States in geoeconomic terms, specifically the clash between the Chinese Belt Road Initiatives (BRI) and US Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in the region. By exploring Vietnam’s approach through the lens of constructivism, the paper argues that the distinctive approach in Vietnam foreign policy in navigating the great power competition is heavily rooted in the nation’s historic experience, identity, and regional norm. These findings show that Vietnam’s behavior is not only determined by the national interest but also by the constructivist elements as mentioned above.

Keywords: Vietnam foreign policy; constructivism; BRI; IPEF; great power rivalry; US-China economic competition

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Конструктивистский подход к стратегии Вьетнама на фоне геоэкономического соперничества США и Китая: случай BRI и IPEF

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Критическое положение Юго-Восточной Азии в целом и Вьетнама в частности делает их главным «полем битвы» геоэкономического соперничества США и Китая за влияние в регионе. Стратегия Вьетнама, обычно рассматриваемая как «хождение по натянутому канату», направлена на достижение баланса, использование преимуществ и противодействие рискам, исходящим от обеих держав. Однако такое объяснение, как и ориентация на национальные интересы, не отражает в полной мере специфику этой стратегии, являющейся частью уникальной внешней политики Вьетнама. Эта статья посвящена исследованию движущей силы вьетнамской стратегии в контексте соперничества между Китаем и США в геоэкономическом плане, в частности, столкновению между китайской инициативой «Один пояс – один путь» (BRI) и американской Индо-Тихоокеанской экономической программой процветания (IPEF) в регионе. Исследуя подход Вьетнама через призму конструктивизма, мы утверждаем, что отличительной чертой внешней политики Вьетнама является опора на исторический опыт, идентичность и региональные нормы страны.

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика Вьетнама; конструктивизм; BRI; IPEF; соперничество великих держав; экономическая конкуренция США и Китая

Introduction

In recent years, there is a growing literature on the effects of the geoeconomic rivalry between the U.S. and China in the Southeast Asia region (Soong, 2023; Nguyen, 2022), where Vietnam is emerging as a pivotal locus, linking mainland and coastal countries. The two superpowers are engaged in a multifaceted confrontation across trade, technology, security, and ideology (Vu et al., 2023). To avoid becoming dragged into this rivalry, Vietnam pursues a non-aligned, hedging strategy, balancing eco-

economic and political relations with both China and the U.S. By skilfully combining bandwagoning and balancing, Vietnam leverages its geopolitical position to boost economic growth while maintaining national autonomy and mitigating pressures from both powers.

From a rationalist standpoint, the strategy of Vietnam falls perfectly into two of the most prevalent paradigms in International Relations (IR) studies, namely neo-realism and neo-liberalism/institutionalism. In many cases and many issues, especially those concerning the South China Sea conflicts (Trần et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2023) and the Lower Mekong region water dispute (Phan, 2024), or even the participation of ASEAN (Nguyen, 2007a; Nguyen, 2007b; Le, 2021), the strategy of Vietnam is usually examined and evaluated in a rationalist, game-theoretic manner. In other words, the behaviors of Vietnam are solely based on its calculation of materialistic gains and losses. However, the later and usually less noticed strand of IR theory, which is social constructivism, is lacking (Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen, 2015; Nguyen, 2010).

This is not to say that constructivism has never been applied in the Vietnamese context. Indeed, many scholars, both Vietnamese and international, for many times did address some of Vietnam's IR issues through the lens of constructivism, specifically the theory of Alexander Wendt (1992, 1994, 2012). However, most of the works focus solely on explaining the nature and dynamics of Vietnam's relations with external powers, mostly China, due to geographic proximity and convoluted shared history (Do, 2021; Nguyen, 2020; Ma and Kang, 2023). Up till now, Vietnam strategy and policy choices toward regional economic projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) have yet to receive any constructivist explanation.

This knowledge gap in the field of Vietnam foreign policy is also the research question of our paper, in which we aim to deeply analyze the driving factor and complex dynamics of Vietnam strategy through a constructivist approach. Incorporating constructivist theory in the study of Vietnam's foreign policy allows for a nuanced understanding of how identity, historical memory, and normative commitments influence Vietnam's actions on the international stage. This approach enriches the analysis of Vietnam's diplomatic strategies beyond the limitations of rationalist theories, offering a more comprehensive picture of how Vietnam's unique cultural and historical factors guide its policy decisions. Constructivist analysis highlights the influence of non-material factors on Vietnam's foreign policy, providing deeper insight into its behaviour in a complex geopolitical landscape.

Literature review

Perhaps, when it comes to studying Vietnam's foreign policy after the Doi Moi era, realism and neo-realism are dominant frameworks, emphasising the state's pursuit of national interest in an anarchic world. Scholars in this school of thought focus on Vietnam's balancing strategies, hedging behaviours, and national security priorities, especially in relation to major powers like China and the United States. For instance, Thayer (2017), from a realist perspective, discusses how Vietnam employs a balancing act to manage its relations with both China and the U.S., reinforcing its security and sovereignty in the South China Sea. Similarly, Vuving (2004) also employs a realist framework, in which he examines Vietnam's "bamboo diplomacy" approach, where flexibility and pragmatism allow Vietnam to balance between major powers without aligning too closely with any one state. While Le (2013) argues that Vietnam's security concerns with China's maritime assertiveness compel it to diversify its strategic partnerships, notably with the United States, Japan, and India. Through a Realist's lens, Le views Vietnam's behavior as a calculated attempt to ensure strategic autonomy and deter potential threats from China without fully aligning with any major power, reflecting neo-realist ideas of balancing.

Neo-liberal approaches to Vietnam's foreign policy, however, are also gaining momentum in recent years, although not as preponderant as compared to the neo-realist one. Neo-liberalist scholars on Vietnam Foreign Policy emphasise the role of international institutions, economic interdependence, and multilateral cooperation. The most significant works examining Vietnam foreign policy through the neoliberalist lens may be those of Nguyen (2002; 2007a; 2007b), in which he analyses the participation of Vietnam into regional cooperation mechanisms like ASEAN after the Cold War. He argues that Vietnam leverages economic globalisation and regional integration to foster development, enhance diplomatic ties, and achieve security through interconnectedness and mutual benefit.

At first glance, the above two dominant approaches to studying Vietnamese foreign policy seem to provide legit results since they are empirically based on rational calculations of Vietnamese behaviours. However, rationalist theories like Realism and Liberalism encounter several limitations when explaining national motivations behind state actions, especially in contexts like Southeast Asia.

Realism, particularly Neo-Realism, faces two primary issues. First, Neorealism's emphasis on anarchy – the notion that no authority supersedes national sovereignty – suggests an unchanging state of conflict in IR. However, this perspective overlooks the potential for cooperation through international institutions, which can mitigate anarchy's effects. Second, Realism's focus on statism, or the central role of states, fails to account for the increasing influence of non-state actors in the global arena. By viewing states as singular entities, Realism also neglects internal political dynamics that significantly shape foreign policy.

Neoliberalism also struggles theoretically to explain state behaviour fully. The tension between self-interest and absolute gains within Neo-Liberalism's framework of international cooperation makes it difficult to realise cooperation effectively. Furthermore, the role of international institutions in regulating state behavior remains contested, with Realists arguing that these institutions primarily serve the interests of powerful states. As global multilateralism declines, institutional constraints on state actions are weakened, challenging Liberalism's core assumption of cooperative governance.

Theoretical framework

IR is perceived as robust and complex under the lens of constructivism. Constructivism states that IR are socially constructed (Fierke, 2016: 162). It is not only shaped by the material factors but also the ideational factors. One of the prominent factors is shared ideas. The basic notion of constructivism is that “human association's structures” are influenced primarily by shared ideas and the actor's identities and interests and constructed by these shared ideas instead of designating by nature (Wendt, 2012: 1). Constructivism provides a lens to understand how the actors are socially constructed (Ibid.: 7). As such, this approach offers a way to understand the actor as a “unit”, which has distinct characteristics that are constructed through social interaction. This is significantly different from other rational schools of thought; for instance, realism considers states as solid and similar actors (Frega, 2020). Various non-material factors such as ideas, culture and norms which are concurrently held or intersubjective concepts and comprehension of social life are important to understand the interaction in IR (Jung, 2019).

As a result, it could be implied that the state under the constructivism approach is not homogenous and is greatly affected by many elements, both material and nonmaterial. And therefore, the state's behaviors are diverse and contextual. Furthermore, this point of view helps to investigate more sophisticated elements under the interaction and motivation behind the state's behavior. As argued, constructivism has brought back the social, historical, and normative to “the centre stage of debate” and, moreover, redefined the critical roles of sociological, historical, and practical aspects of IR scholarships (Reus-Smit, 2013).

There is not a consensus on which are the foundational elements of the constructivist approach in IR. Constructivism itself is not an international politics theory on the first hand; thus, it rather explains why the actors are constructed than points out which actors should be studied and does not determine the content of such theories (Wendt, 2012: 7; 1992). However, there are some common features that are usually discussed when mentioning constructivism. These are the anarchic international system, identity, and norm.

Constructivism also shares with other schools of thought the notion of an anarchic international system. The international system could be referred to as a group of independent political communities whose behaviors are necessary in the calculations of the others, despite no shared rules or institutions (Bull, 1995: 10). In contrast with the other rationalist schools, the constructivists argue that if there is an existence of an anarchic system that is made by the perception and interaction of the states within the system, which is shaped by the identities and interests, “anarchy is what the states make of it” (Wendt, 1992). Therefore, it could be inferred that the structure of the international systems depends on how the states perceive that system. And the way the state perceives the international system depends on its identity.

Identity is one of the most crucial elements of the constructivists when discussing the motivation and explaining the behavior of the actors in IR. The notion of identity is not actually a pure concept in IR. It is based on the identity concept of sociologists and psychologists. Thus, like how the identity identifies how an individual would behave in society, the identity could be used as a

“signal”, which is necessary to establish the durable expectation to predict the behavior pattern of the states (Hopf, 1998). Approached under the foreign policy analysis perspective, this identity generates specific values, and these values guide the preferences of the policymakers toward certain policy options (Ashizawa, 2008). Identity communicates to you and others your essence while also informing you about the essence of others (Tajfel, 1981: 255). This set is multifaceted and contingent upon numerous social interrelated characteristics, including historical, cultural, political, and social contexts, both domestically and internationally (Vucetic, 2017). The identity signals the set of a state’s preferences and actions, and identity varies depending on social interactions in different historical and social contexts. The interests of the state are also mutually socially constructed.

Norm is another aspect which the constructivists believe determines state behavior. Similar to identity, norms are socially constructed through the interaction of individuals within particular social groups, and norms direct these actions and beliefs by forming the interests and identities of certain actors (Hoffmann, 2010). Norms do not dictate specific policy choices; rather, they elucidate the objectives and purposes of states; additionally, norms serve as a vital source of inspiration and motivation for the formulation and execution of foreign policy (Björkdahl, 2002). In addition, it is important to note that norms are not always necessarily fixed or flexible; as a consequence, a norm could have numerous variations depending on how they are adopted and integrated into the previous ones, or how they replace the old norms (Acharya, 2004).

The approach of constructivism could provide a clearer lens to investigate the underlying dynamics of uniqueness in Vietnam’s foreign policy. With the emphasis on the very “inner” element, the constructivist approach will allow us to investigate the complex root of Vietnamese foreign policy, especially in the opaque situation of the U.S. – China rivalry. The element influencing Vietnam’s foreign policy is the strong impact of ideas and identity, which are usually ignored. A notable example to illustrate this point is Vietnam’s application to join ASEAN. During that time, the Vietnamese’s motivation to join ASEAN did not come from economic or security pragmatism; instead, Vietnam was appealed by the norms of the association, such as equality among members, mutual respect, non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, non-use of force in state relations, resolution of disputes by peaceful means, decision-making by consensus, and searching for the group to join in order to have “the sense of belonging” (Nguyen, 2002). As a result, it could be affirmed that Vietnamese foreign policy is not determined only by materialistic interests, but the ideals, identity, and shared norms also have a great deal of influence.

Not only that, the approach of the constructivists allows to escape the Eurocentrism of the conventional rationalism approach. The theoretical assumptions of the rationalist schools, which developed based on purely Western ontologies, are seen as a denial of the specificity of identity and the social construction process (Acharya, 2000; Toropchin, 2024). Thus, this theoretical perspective could be limited in discovering the dynamics of political processes in a non-Western state such as Vietnam.

Vietnam’s approach to BRI and IPEF

Context: The geo-economic competition between China and the US in the region

The economic sector is becoming one of the most critical fields in the U.S. – China competition. In the context of globalization, the interdependence of economies in the world leads to states “weaponizing” economic tools to achieve political goals and deter political rivals (Gertz and Evers, 2020). Therefore, economics is one of the most critical aspects of the competition between these two great powers.

To further reinforce their economic position in the region, both powers have implemented different economic initiatives. Among them, the two most prominent are the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) initiated by the U.S. and the Belt-Road Initiative (BRI) initiated by China. These two initiatives are not direct counterparts; they are more like “apples” and “oranges”¹. However, in terms of enhancing economic influence in the region, these initiatives can be comparable due to their equally significant and strategic goals. Both aim to win the favors of smaller states in the region.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was first introduced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. This program is an investment framework for critical infrastructure projects across Asia, Europe, and the In-

¹ Pitman, A. (2022). *The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework is not an anti-China ploy*. *Dhaka Tribune*, June, 19. https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/longform/272754/the-indo-pacific-economic-framework-is-not-an#_ftn3 (accessed on January 2, 2025)

do-Pacific region. The goal of this initiative is to provide financial investments to enhance connectivity, regional cooperation, and development on an intercontinental scale. The BRI is also considered an opportunity for low- and middle-income countries to access infrastructure development capital (Rana and Ji, 2020b; Shang, 2019). Chinese investment through the BRI provides much-needed capital for states in filling the financing gap for domestic infrastructure projects. Besides, BRI also facilitates connectivity, digital transformation, smart urbanisation, and promotes economic growth in the region. Despite being a major driver for economic progress in the region, the BRI is also treated with scepticism due to its hidden risks. These risks include, but are not limited to, debt burdens, corruption, and environmental issues (Ascensão et al., 2018; Parks et al., 2023). From a political perspective, the BRI can push joining states closer to and gradually dependent on China. Understandably, China could leverage this asymmetric advantage over smaller neighbors to further divide the region and gain superiority in many political affairs, such as territorial disputes (Cha, 2023; Chang and Yang, 2020; Rana and Ji, 2020a).

From the U.S. perspective, China's increasing economic influence in the region can deteriorate Washington's role in the region's economy, especially after the U.S.'s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) (Williams et al., 2022). To revitalise the U.S. position in the regional economic order, in May 2020, President Joe Biden's administration introduced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). Although being considered a countermeasure to the BRI and even to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), IPEF should be understood as a vision, a signal, and a pronouncement of the U.S.'s objectives and efforts to keep up with the economic growth of the Indo-Pacific area². The participant states expect that joining the IPEF will bring valuable economic opportunities for them. This optimism stems from the presence of major regional economies, such as the U.S., Japan, and Korea, in the framework and the potential access to modern technology (Raga, 2022). The pillars of the IPEF are expected to elevate the region's economic standards³. Furthermore, the IPEF is viewed as an economic framework that could counterbalance China's economic dominance and offer states in the region more policy choices (Abadi and Al-Fadhat, 2023; Jiang, 2022). However, there are concerns about the IPEF's practicality due to significant disparities in economic development levels among participants. Additionally, scepticism also arises from numerous high-demanding standards and rules imposed, with relatively few economic opportunities offered in return for participants⁴.

Vietnam: "A dancer among the wolves"

The economic opportunities offered by great powers in the competition to win the "hearts and minds" of states drive many states into a challenging situation of "choosing a side". Under such circumstances, every state has to make hard and crucial policy decisions regarding the U.S.–China rivalry, especially as regards the BRI and the IPEF, considering the two initiatives' economic impacts (Parameswaran, 2023; Abadi and Al-Fadhat, 2023; Raga, 2022⁵). There exists a notable divergence in the responses toward the clash of these two powers, especially in the Southeast Asia region – the neighbourhood area of Vietnam (Cook, 2018⁶).

However, in comparison to other Southeast Asian states, Vietnam has a cautious approach to both initiatives, which differentiates Vietnam from other countries in the region. Towards IPEF, similar to Indonesia, Vietnam also pursues economic pragmatism to strengthen its economic capacity and diversify the economy. However, Vietnam's participation in the IPEF is still characterised as a caution. This comes from the fundamental differences in the political regimes between Vietnam and

² Forough, M. (2022). America's pivot to Asia 2.0: The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. *The Diplomat*, May 26. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/americas-pivot-to-asia-2-0-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework/> (accessed on January 2, 2025)

³ Negara, S., Wihardja, M. (2023). *IPEF's relevance for ASEAN. Fulcrum*, September 19. <https://fulcrum.sg/aseanfocus/ipefs-relevance-for-asean/> (accessed on January 2, 2025)

⁴ Jaknanihan, A. (2023). Keeping the IPEF afloat is in Indonesia's interest. *East Asia Forum*, December 9. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/12/09/keeping-the-ipef-afloat-is-in-indonesias-interest/> (accessed on January 2, 2025)

⁵ See also: Saha, P. (2022). The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF): An ASEAN perspective. *Observer Research Foundation*, June 25. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-indo-pacific-economic-framework> (accessed on January 2, 2025)

⁶ See also: Ewe, K. (2024). Is Southeast Asia leaning more toward China? New survey shows mixed results. *Time*, April 2. <https://time.com/6962557/china-us-asean-southeast-asia-rivalry-survey/>; Mishra, R., Wang, P. (2024). The perception game: How are China and the US viewed in Southeast Asia? *The Diplomat*, April 16. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/the-perception-game-how-are-china-and-the-us-viewed-in-southeast-asia/> (accessed on January 2, 2025)

the U.S., especially IPEF's Fair Economy pillar, which addresses tax issues and anti-corruption, which are sensitive issues in Vietnam (Huynh, 2022; Trinh and Ho, 2024).

Similarly, Vietnam adopts a flexible approach to the BRI. Vietnam's approach to BRI is a combination of support and caution (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2021; Vu et al., 2022). On one hand, Vietnam supports the BRI as it offers Ha Noi an opportunity to access financial capital and technology, which can significantly promote Vietnam's development. On the other hand, Vietnam remains sceptical of the BRI due to China's unpredictability and lack of reliability. Persistent tensions over sovereignty issues, as well as the complicated history of Vietnam–China relations, further exacerbate this scepticism. Additionally, concerns over geo-economic risks, domestic public opinion, and potential threats to sovereignty also bolster Vietnam's wary stance (Pham and Ba, 2021⁷).

A constructivist explanation: Vietnam's identity-based foreign policy

The cautious approach of Vietnam to these two significant economic initiatives could be argued through many theoretical lenses. The rational theoretical theorists tend to look at the approach of Vietnam under the determination of interests, which mostly associate with the materialistic factors, such as economic pragmatic consideration (Wu and Valesco, 2024), optimization of resources and opportunities to handle the specific issues in various aspects (Phan, 2024), or security insurance (Marston, 2024).

However, this approach could undermine various non-materialistic factors that impact the Vietnam policy. Moreover, the materialistic approach risks overgeneralizing the complex dynamics behind the regional political landscape, such as the diverse cultural foundation and the convoluted history of each state (Acharya and Stubbs, 2006), and Vietnam is one noticeable example. The Vietnamese foreign policy tenets of “integration yet independence”, often referred to as “bamboo diplomacy”⁸, serve as the main guideline for Vietnam in its approach to both the BRI and IPEF. The fundamental tenets of “bamboo diplomacy” are adaptability and practicality, grounded in autonomy and national interests; this approach entails maintaining independence and neutrality towards all major powers, optimizing benefits while mitigating strategic uncertainties (Do, 2022⁹). Through the lens of social constructivism, this approach is rooted in Vietnam's identity and perception, which are grounded in Vietnam's engagement within social and historical contexts, both domestically and internationally. This explains the caution of Vietnam policymakers in the case of BRI and IPEF. As argued, Vietnam is well aware of several risks' ties to the diminishment of the participants on the initiative's host. Furthermore, aligning with one camp could open a “Pandora's box”, allowing the U.S. or China to increase their unilateral influence.

As pointed out from a theoretical perspective, it could be argued that Vietnam's set of interests come from its identity. One of the most important interests that always determines Vietnam's foreign policy is its independence and autonomy. This interest is shaped by Vietnam's identity as a post-colonial state and its geostrategic position. Vietnam, similar to the other states in Southeast Asia, is located in a geo-strategic position that has rendered it the main target of the great powers' strategy and policy. As a result, this is the place that usually suffers from the rivalry of the great powers during history (Raine and Le Mièr, 2013). For instance, the competition between the United States and Soviet Unions in the region during the Cold War led to the violence from war to insurgency, which caused millions of deaths (Le, 2013). In particular, the rivalry of two Cold War major powers in Vietnam resulted in a war lasting nearly two decades with millions of deaths. This could also be associated with the colonial past of Vietnam, which, together with Southeast Asian states, has generated a strong sense of independence and resisted any interference into the internal affairs of the states. In addition, based on this shared identity, the norm of non-intervention becomes critical in the regional politics. These characteristics could be illustrated through the

⁷ See also: Trinh, V., Do, H. (2023). Vietnam hedges its bets on the BRI. *East Asia Forum*, March 15. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/03/15/vietnam-hedges-its-bets-on-the-bri/> (accessed on January 2, 2025)

⁸ Le, D., Lai, A. (2021). The evolution of Vietnamese Foreign Policy After the 13th Party Congress. *The Diplomat*, March 10. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/the-evolution-of-vietnamese-foreign-policy-after-the-13th-party-congress/> (accessed on January 2, 2025)

⁹ See also: Phan, X., To, M. (2022). What's Behind Vietnam's “Bamboo Diplomacy” Discourse? *Fulcrum*, July 22. <https://fulcrum.sg/whats-behind-vietnams-bamboo-diplomacy-discourse/> (accessed on January 2, 2025)

institution of ASEAN. ASEAN, unlike the European Union, emphasises the consensus and consultation of the Member States in making and implementing the regional policy, instead having a common legislation, executive, and judiciary agency, or having any common foreign and security policy in order to maintain all the autonomy in policy direction (Villacorta, 2020: 260). The establishment of ASEAN is seen as the region's states' effort to institutionalize the non-intervention principle to establish a regional cooperation mechanism to prevent external intervention (Katsamura, 2004).

Furthermore, the high emphasis on autonomy comes from Vietnam's experience of "bandwagoning" into one major power in the great power rivalry. For instance, the dependency of Vietnam on the Soviet Union in many aspects, from economics to military, imposed a severe burden on Vietnam. Vietnam's economic dependence on Soviet aid led to a recession when such assistance was reduced in the 1980s, when Vietnam was no longer a "hotpot" of the Cold War and the Soviet Union had to deal with domestic issues (Beresford and Phong, 2000: 150). Moreover, the increasingly reliance of Vietnam on the USSR following the Vietnam War, and especially in the protracted and expensive military campaign in Cambodia, effectively diminished the hard-won national independence and shifted Vietnam's post-war policy to align with Soviet interests in Southeast Asia (Kelemen, 1984). As a result, which made Vietnam highly cautious about any risks that could undermine its independence and autonomy in policymaking.

It is also worth noting that Vietnam's engagement with both BRI and IPEF, while mindful of external potential risks, is defined by the regional consensus on the "value of harmony". This norm in Southeast Asia's foreign policy serves as a strategic approach for navigating the region out of competition between great powers (Murphy, 2017). This flexibility, fluidity, and neutral stance enable these states – mostly small and medium states – to leverage the benefits from all the powers, reduce tension, and maintain security; more, the stable and peaceful environment stemming from this neutral approach by these states is undeniably necessary for the stable development of the region (Yoshimatsu, 2023). With this harmony-centred identity, it could be extrapolated that Southeast Asian states adopt a balanced stance, act prudently, and avoid choosing sides in the context of the BRI and IPEF competition, and Vietnam is not an exception.

Another factor that should be considered when investigating Vietnam's foreign policy is the public opinion. Public opinion is one of the considerable social interactions that contribute to Vietnam's interests, later the direction for the foreign policy. Different from the misconception about the public opinion repression in Vietnam, the Vietnamese people's voice indeed has a significant impact on policymaking, particularly the foreign policy making. It could be witnessed that Vietnamese authority has a certain engagement with the people's concern in various issues, especially those related to relationships with China (Kerkvliet, 2019). The widespread negative attitude of Vietnamese people, especially towards Chinese economic expansion, is notable (Son, 2020). Combining the problematic history and current territorial disputes, the Vietnamese government has the reason to be cautious on any initiatives of China that could risk its autonomy and trigger the public's negative reaction.

Conclusion

The traditional approaches to Vietnamese foreign policy tend to be observed under the lens of the rationalist schools of thought such as Realism and Liberalism, which focus on the materialistic factors as a measurement of Vietnam's national interests. However, these approaches may miss the significant impact of non-material factors such as identity, shared norms and ideas, rooted in Vietnam's domestic and international historical and social context. Vietnam's awareness of its geostrategic location, colonial past and historical dependence on a major power in the rivalry between the great powers has formed the core values and interests of the country – independence and autonomy. Not only that, the domestic interaction – like public opinion – has an important role in shaping the policy's direction. Furthermore, the shared norms in the region, which come from the historical traumas, such as non-intervention and the value of harmony towards stability, are worth noticing when discussing the dynamics of Vietnamese policy direction. These ideational factors have eminent roles in explaining the overly circumspection on BRI and IPEF. As a consequence, this case contributes to theoretical approaches to Vietnam foreign policy research. This is significant to build up the theoretical understanding of unique Vietnam's "bamboo diplomacy". Furthermore, the paper offers empirical evidence on the constructivism approach to studying IR.

Despite providing a significant empirical case on how constructivism could be utilised to have a deeper exploration of the sophisticated dynamics behind Vietnamese foreign policy making, some limitations should be addressed. Vietnam's approach to the BRI and IPEF emphasises the geo-economic aspect within the framework of China–U.S. competition in Southeast Asia. This reflects a small side of Vietnam's foreign policy. In order to have a more comprehensive analysis of the impact of non-materialist factors on Vietnam's foreign policy, constructivists argue that it is necessary to further investigate the effects of these factors on other aspects of the country's policy. Additionally, it is important to investigate certain elements of non-ideational factors in order to strengthen the argument that these ideational factors shape Vietnam's approach to foreign policy.

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