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How Vietnam Can Balance Against China, on Land and at Sea

Vietnam's proximity to China and lack of strategic depth limit its options in forming security partnerships with other great powers.

By Khang Vu

Vietnam [hosted](#) its first international defense expo last week, in a move to [diversify](#) its weapons suppliers away from Russia. In addition to the [technical aspect](#) of weapons, the expo was also an [opportunity](#) for partners such as the United States or India to foster a closer defense relationship with Hanoi, and to [signal](#) to China that Vietnam is serious about modernizing and diversifying its armed forces.

So where does this expo fit into Vietnam's general security strategy? While the country [prioritizes](#) maintaining good relations with China to avoid unnecessary conflicts, it is looking for options that can help minimize the negative impact of aggressive Chinese behaviors in the short term and to [prepare for the worst](#) in the long term. Vietnam will balance against China once deferring to it does more harm than good. The expo without a doubt fits the country's "Three Nos" non-aligned foreign policy, for it does not commit Hanoi to other powers but [assists](#) its arms production and modernization. But the key question remains: how can Vietnam balance against China?

A country has [two main ways](#) to balance against a threat: internal balancing via domestic arms production and external balancing via military alliances. Vietnam's non-aligned foreign policy means that it has picked the first option while [reserving](#) the second option for the future. But while it is tempting to suggest that Hanoi's picking of the first option is due to its own [agency](#), ignoring the geographical source of that decision is detrimental to understanding [the systemic factors](#) that have driven [Vietnam's grand strategy](#) since the country's founding in 1945. Vietnam's geography is deeply hostile to it nurturing an alliance relationship with any external great power other than China, and it is geography that has pushed Vietnam to adopt the option of internal balancing.

Vietnam borders a strong China to the north, a mountainous Laos to the west, a suspicious Cambodia to the south, and a disputed sea to the east. The country has therefore long lacked strategic depth or a distance from Vietnam's frontline to its heartland. As Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap [noted](#) that on the eve of the First Indochina War:

"Indochina is a strategic unit, a single theater of operations. Therefore we have the task of helping to liberate all of Indochina . . . especially for reasons of *strategic geography* [emphasis added], we cannot conceive of a Vietnam completely independent while Cambodia and Laos are ruled by imperialism."

This lack of strategic depth means that Hanoi will have little warning in the event of a massive invasion, and will always have to rely on itself first and foremost because an external helper will not be able to respond quickly enough.

A case in point is the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979. The China-Vietnam border at Friendship Pass is [less than 180 kilometers](#) away from Hanoi and it [took](#) China roughly two weeks to capture Lang Son and advance more than 50 kilometers into Vietnamese territory. From Lang Son, 120 kilometers away from Hanoi, China could have launched a direct assault on Vietnam's capital, but it [decided](#) to withdraw after successfully teaching Vietnam a short but costly "lesson," in order to [avoid](#) Soviet intervention. Because of their great distance from Vietnam, the Soviets [could do little](#) to help it quickly and directly under the terms of the Soviet Union-Vietnam Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, apart from an airlift of arms and a naval deployment off the coast of Vietnam. Vietnam's battle-hardened military was thus vital to slowing down the Chinese advance. Had Vietnam relied exclusively on the Soviet Union and neglected its own army, it would have been defenseless against China.

Even when there was an external power stationed on Vietnamese soil, China was [committed](#) to driving that power off Indochina. Beijing [assisted](#) the Viet Minh and later North Vietnam to successfully defeat France and the United States and their client states in 1954 and 1975 respectively. China's geographical closeness to Vietnam means that it can always pour more resources into Indochina than any other great power can, and it has the resolve to challenge those powers' presence on its periphery at all costs. Vietnam was always under the Chinese sphere of influence before the decline of the Qing Empire [weakened](#) China's ability to respond to French colonization of Vietnam. Now that China is strong, [no external great powers](#) can come to Vietnam's continental defense even if they are committed to doing so. The recent failures of the French, the Americans, and the Soviets to establish and maintain a military outpost in Indochina is a constant reminder of Chinese [determination](#) to use force against external powers on its periphery and Vietnam's inability to rely on external balancing on land.

Moreover, different from Ukraine bordering the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which [allows](#) it to receive steady flows of arms from the West, Vietnam borders no other great powers' sphere of influence. That geographical isolation means Vietnam will have to rely on its own arms inventory if a war with China breaks out. Hanoi's emphasis on modernizing its defense industry and its eschewing of foreign alliances strongly reflects the limited options imposed by geographical proximity to China.

But Vietnam cannot compete with China in terms of resources, and it faces [another hard choice](#) when it comes to internal balancing as well: whether to either modernize its navy and air force or invest more on the army in order to slow down weapons obsolescence. Vietnam's army [is no match](#) for China's army, and it cannot rely on an external security guarantor due to hostile geography. As such, Vietnam [needs](#) to prioritize its army over the navy and air force to ensure that China cannot exploit its lack of strategic depth.

An orientation of resources away from the maritime domain, however, does not equate to an orientation of attention. Vietnam [should not](#) abandon its claims in the South China Sea just because it must prioritize continental defense. While Vietnam cannot rely on an external power for continental defense, it can luckily do so for maritime defense. East Asia is [divided](#) into two distinct spheres of influence with China dominating continental Asia and the United States controlling maritime Asia. In contrast to the geographical exclusivity of Vietnam's continental landscape, its maritime geography is open to all external powers. This allows Vietnam to [internationalize](#) the South China Sea disputes, a move that China [does not](#) like, and fosters closer defense relations with other great powers via port visits. Importantly, those port visits

cannot fundamentally threaten China's exclusive continental sphere and thus are less provocative than a permanent foreign military base on Vietnamese soil, one of Vietnam's Three Nos.

The inclusive nature of the South China Sea opens the possibility of Vietnam shifting the burden of balancing China in the maritime sphere onto the great powers with vested interests in a free and open Indo-Pacific, while saving resources for internal balancing on land. And this move also fits with Washington's [distaste](#) for fighting a land war in Asia against China. The United States has embraced [this formula](#), as seen in its [transfers](#) of naval assets to Vietnam and its [involvement](#) in challenging Chinese maritime claims. Vietnam and the United States, as well as other members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, should continue strengthening cooperation over maritime security to help Hanoi address its resources scarcity in modernizing its armed forces and devote more money to continental defense. Internal balancing on land and external balancing on sea should be the two key tenets of Vietnam's security policy.

There is a Vietnamese saying that “Nuoc xa khong cuu duoc lua gan” – “Distant water cannot put out a nearby fire” – which emphasizes Vietnam's preference to always rely on itself to balance against China rather than another distant great power. Vietnam's lack of strategic depth and its proximity to China limit its and other great powers' options for protecting Vietnam. The defense expo is another forum for Vietnam to address the [growing](#) imbalance of power with China under its self-reliant security policy, and we should expect Vietnam to continue the process of arms diversification given that Russia can [no longer](#) serve as a reliable supplier. History has shown that Vietnam can only be secured when its army is strong, and its weapons are abundant.

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