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The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Emergence of Vietnam as a Middle Power

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Le Dinh Tinh and Vu Thi Thu Ngan

Abstract

Limited capability and political will have caused the great powers to fail to demonstrate their global leadership in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, which has created greater room to manoeuvre for other countries to influence international affairs. Preliminary achievements in the fight against the COVID-19 crisis have buttressed the rising global status of small and medium-sized states, including Vietnam. Although Vietnam has recently been recognised as an emerging middle power, scepticism looms regarding whether this higher international status is beyond its capacity. We argue that the pandemic may act as a catalyst for Vietnam to further elevate its strategic role as a middle power on the international stage in the medium and long term.

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Keywords

middle-power theory, emerging middle power, COVID-19, proactive and creative diplomacy, nation-branding, Vietnam

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a "black swan" phenomenon and a "game-changing" factor in international relations, proliferating unpredictable variables to accelerate the decay of the existing international order. With respect to international politics, the outbreak of

Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Hanoi, Viet Nam

Corresponding Author:
Le Dinh Tinh, Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Hanoi, Viet Nam.
Email: tinhdl@dav.edu.vn

COVID-19 is a test of national governance at both the domestic and external levels. While great powers such as the United States and China are likely to precipitate a new cold war and put global governance at stake, the middle-power moment has come punctually through active responses to the pandemic. Alongside Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea, Vietnam has been seen as a success story in stepping up to the plate vis-à-vis COVID-19 (Lemahieu and Leng, 2020; Lowy Institute, 2020a, 2020b; Reed, 2020). The country has so far worked towards branding itself as an emerging middle power.

This article further elucidates the significant ways that COVID-19 has contributed to shaping Vietnam's middlepowership, which it has established gradually over the past decade. Quantitatively, the COVID-19 response is considered as a Lowy Institute's sub-indicator, measuring the expert perceptions of individual nations' handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent impact on their reputation, thereby evaluating the efficacy of a nation's foreign policy and the overall ranking of Asian powers (Lemahieu and Leng, 2020). Besides the favourable factors derived from the handling of COVID-19, it is important to acknowledge that it is Vietnam's ceaseless efforts to embrace the challenges and strive for empowerment that allows the country to grasp the opportunity and elevate its status to that of an emerging middle power. We frame the argument such that COVID-19 is one of many variables that make Vietnam a candidate for middle power. Furthermore, we consider COVID-19 a "catalyst" rather than a "turning point" or a "decisive factor."

Through distilling three dominant international relations theories, including neo-realism, neo-liberalism, and constructivism in the study of middle powers, the authors argue that Vietnam fit the analytical paradigm of a middle power even before the outbreak of coronavirus there in early 2020. By putting new wine into old bottles, this article seeks to contribute to the extant literature by delving deeper into the case of Vietnam as a middle power, which remains understudied.

The analysis has two main sections. In the first section, the article briefly recalibrates middle-power theory to design a relevant analytical framework for the case of Vietnam. Although middle powers have been marginalised in the literature compared to great powers, mainstream international relations theories demonstrate their explanatory power in parsing characteristics of featured middle powers (see Cooper et al., 1993; Cox, 1989; Holbraad, 1984). In the second section, by examining Vietnam's practical aspects both before and amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the article contends that Vietnam has been experiencing several aspects of enjoying a higher international position that correspond to a medium-sized country. More pivotally, though the COVID-19 pandemic acts as a contingent variable, it has simultaneously been the moment of truth for Vietnam's consolidated middlepowership, which has been years in the making. This pandemic is a stimulant for Vietnam's ecosocio-elasticity, proactive and creative diplomacy, and nation-branding amid comprehensive international integration.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of a "middle power" has not only emerged in the academic domain but been defined as a policy framework of various states, such as Canada, Australia, South Korea, South Africa, and Indonesia (Jordaan, 2003).

This terminology is not a product of contemporary politics, as it was first proposed in the 15th century by Giovanni Botero, mayor of Milan. A middle power was defined as a country with adequate power to maintain its own autonomy without the help of others (Shin, 2015).

There is no consensus on a set of criteria to constitute a middle power, and in the extant literature, it remains an understudied subject matter. Nonetheless, there is an academic recognition that a middle power is a sovereign state falling in the middle of the power spectrum that measures a country's capacity and international influence, one whose diplomatic conduct is neither drastic nor ambitious but also not negatively defensive and simultaneously represents a certain identity (Le, 2018). To decode the conceptual complexity of middle powers, it is of essence to link different interpretations from diverse theoretical paradigms.

Conceptual Paradigms

Realist Explanation: A Capacity-Based Approach. Realists, particularly those whose branch of structural realism argue that middle power is a relational notion, because it is often defined in juxtaposition to other power tiers in the hierarchical system, especially in relation to great powers. Middle powers are neither strong nor weak in the international system, but they have middling access to resources and an adequate ability to impact the external operating environment (Howe, 2017: 243–244). Designating with certainty all those specific nations that belong to this category and pinning down a set of material attributes of middle powers is intricately complex. In quantitative correlation, Carsten Holbraad boiled it down to the GDP criterion, because it covers the measurable variables such as territorial size, resources, and leadership capacity (Holbraad, 1984: 79). From a different perspective, in the long run, population can also be a valuable index; while in the short run, the magnitude of the army, defence expenditure, and arsenal standard may be useful indicators. To identify a middle power, Ralf Emmers and Sarah Teo set up a formula based on seven datasets including GDP, GDP per capita, area, population, military expenditure, human development index (HDI), and participation in international organisations (Emmers and Teo, 2018: 112). Another important indicator covered in Jonathan H. Ping's research is trade as a percentage of GDP, as it reflects a country's commitment to the world economy (Ping, 2005: 57, 66–68).

Albeit not on par with great powers, middle powers can be considered as "secondary" powers, in possession of the capability to demonstrate a degree of agency in shaping international politics. For example, 11 of the 20 countries in the G20 are placed in the category of typical middle powers. Realist interpretations of middle powers also imply their unique role in the international system. As they are in closer proximity to the top of the global power spectrum, these countries are inclined to be particularly sensitive to systemic changes (Holbraad, 1984: 5). Every change to international orders brings them both challenges and opportunities. This argument will theoretically untangle why middle powers to some extent see the current pandemic as a critical juncture.

Liberalist Explanation: A Behaviour-Based Approach. Meanwhile, from the ideology of liberalism, middle powers are individuated from others by their specific diplomatic

behaviours. Middle powers do not act alone effectively but can exert influence over a group of countries or international institutions (Keohane, 1969: 298). Prioritising multilateral resolutions, promoting dialogue and peaceful solutions in international disputes, and advocating for being good citizens of the international community constitute featured foreign policies of middle powers (Cooper et al., 1993: 19). Middle powers give prominence to multilateralism, international laws, and the network of diplomatic relations in foreign policy (Emmers and Teo, 2014: 192; Ungerer and Smith, 2010: 4). In contrast to the power-based approach that attaches importance to the material aspect, the behavior-based approach emphasises norms, ethics, and accountability of these countries in the international system.

First, despite the anarchic nature of international politics, which implies that states must pursue self-help strategies, cooperation is not discouraged because, in reality, it is an important type of self-help. In contradistinction to major powers preferring unilateralism, middle powers are less likely to act unilaterally effectively (Jordaan, 2003: 169), especially in areas where great powers dominate. Furthermore, although major powers design and impose rules of the game, multilateral mechanisms officially remain an open and transparent forum to ensure equality among state actors, thereby helping medium-sized states to participate more deeply in the process of global governance and demonstrating typical roles such as coordinator, catalyst, and initiator (Cooper et al., 1993: 24–25). Middle powers utilise this tool as part of a soft-balancing strategy.

Second, international laws serve as a key policy instrument of middle powers. Obviously, the more rules-based the order is, the less it is subject to the paramountcy of mighty states (Ikenberry, 2018: 26). As nations increase their prosperity and status, they will also desire a rules-based system to protect their national interests. This type of global governance system will attract peripheral and semi-peripheral states. To sum up, middle powers are interested in supporting a stable world order with a predictable and rules-based environment that will help them survive and thrive and to gain legitimacy in terms of contributing to regional and international affairs.

Third, middle powers prefer network diplomacy. The two main focuses of this strategy are to partner with all major powers and to build informal coalitions or (comprehensive/strategic) partnership frameworks with like-minded countries. Instead of counterbalancing or bandwagoning, middle powers often pursue hedging and/or an equilibrium strategy in certain situations (Darmosumarto, 2013; Tran et al., 2013: 81–82). The more a middle power constitutes a node in the network, the more it gains power, because its immersion in multiple interdependencies makes it functionally indispensable (Astley and Sachdeva, 1984: 104, 106). Building informal alliances and partnership frameworks are its hallmarks (Higgott and Cooper, 1990: 589).

Constructivist Explanation: An Identity-Based Approach. As a critical theory, the constructivist school of international relations defines middle powers considering their national identity, which is constantly constructed by self-reflection and intersubjective perception. Accordingly, the building of self-image by a middle power (manifested in foreign policy) and other countries' recognition of its credible international status help

shape its middlepowership (Teo, 2018: 224). Middlepowership comes not only from objective judgment but also from the role of self-awareness of the nation's place in the international system (Hey, 2003: 2). A nation's self-conceptualisation is the perception of "who it is and what it stands for and constitutes the crucial element of identity" (Shin, 2016: 193) These countries may not have the strength to be on an equal level of the hierarchy as major powers, but they do not want to be cognately categorised with the rest, thus seeking specific and alternative roles to frame their brand (Cox, 1996: 245). There are four main role identities undertaken by middle powers, including initiator, broker, coordinator, and norms diffuser (Lee et al., 2015: 5). A middle power may target a more ambitious leadership role by also convening like-minded members, effectively driving the development of an international norm, and constructing security and economic architecture in tandem with great powers.

Although the positional approach is a prerequisite to placing a middle power in the international hierarchy, according to Kalevi Holsti, the capability assessment is most meaningful when carried on within the framework of certain foreign policy objectives (Holsti, 1964: 184). A country's influence as a middle power is then defined within the context of a larger community, and the network itself presents opportunities for middle powers to exercise influence and achieve policy goals and/or desired intentions (Lee et al., 2015: 6). Meanwhile, national identity is constructed alongside that of other nations in the international system.

In lieu of parsing middle powers from a single theory, this article applies eclecticism, arguing that it is necessary to use all three of these prisms to identify a middle power. Three criteria vary in level under specific circumstances as some middle powers have limited resources but punch above their weight while there are some mid-level powers without the political ambition to play the larger-than-life roles.

Vietnam as an Emerging Middle Power Before and Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Looking through the lens of middle-power theory, a more complex and nuanced reality comes into view. Vietnam, to some extent, has proven its stature as an emerging middle power, fitting the academically recognised criteria mentioned above.

Before COVID-19: A Potential and Aspiring Middle Power

A question that has recently been raised is whether or not Vietnam is a middle power (Jha et al., 2020). The identification of Vietnam as a middle power or a medium-sized state has aroused controversy in both academic and policymaking groups. In reality, a number of research papers have described Vietnam as a middle power. In the Asia Power Index released by the Lowy Institute, Vietnam has been continuously classified into the middle-power category (Lowy Institute, 2019a, 2019b). Based on the three-criteria theoretical framework, Vietnam is considered an emerging middle power, which is evidenced as follows:

Capacity. In terms of capacity, Vietnam as a whole is positioned in the middle of the global power spectrum amongst more than 200 countries and territories. As measured by GDP (PPP), Vietnam was ranked 32nd in the world (World Bank, 2019b) and is projected to surpass current several medium-sized countries, namely the Netherlands and South Africa, to become the 29th-largest economy by 2030. By 2050, according to a recent PwC projection, Vietnam's economy will overtake Canada's, Australia's, and Italy's to reach the top 20 of the world's largest economies, likely keeping pace with South Korea (ranked 18th) (Hawksworth, 2017: 7). This 12-level promotion is arguably the most impressive amongst emerging economies (Hawksworth, 2017: 4). Based on production and export capacity, Standard Chartered categorised Vietnam into the 7 per cent growth club, and by 2030 the GDP per capita (PPP) is expected to quadruple, going from | USD 2500 (in 2018) to USD 10,400 (in 2030), moving the country to the high-income status and realising the Vision 2030 (Jha, 2019: 7). The national economy has been ranked as the second most open in Asia. Its trade facilitation ranks third in ASEAN, trailing only Singapore and Thailand (OECD, 2019). The country's Global Innovation Index (GII) has been ceaselessly upgraded (ranked 42 of 129 in 2019), leading the group of low-middle-income countries (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2019), close to achieving the goal of building a knowledge economy set by its leaders.

With regard to the military capability, Vietnam is currently 23rd in the world in an annual Global Firepower ranking (Global Firepower, 2019). Compared to other Asia–Pacific countries, Vietnam ranks 11th, two levels higher than Indonesia (13th) and higher than other claimants in the South China Sea (aside from China) (Lowy Institute, 2019a). Its defence spending has recently been maintained above the threshold of 2 per cent of GDP, "meeting the demands of strengthening national defence potential for safeguarding the Homeland while ensuring neither falling into an arms race nor making the defence budget an economic burden" (Ministry of National Defense, 2019: 40).

Considering the long-term index, Vietnam is now amongst the top 15 most populous countries in the world and is at the later stage of its golden population, with 40 per cent of its citizens aged 10 to 24. Regarding the human development index (HDI), in 2018, Vietnam's value stands at 0.693 – which is merely 0.007 points below the threshold of the High Human Development Group and puts it into the second-highest medium tier – positioned at 118/189 countries (UNDP, 2018).

Vietnam's indicators (shown in Table 1) illustrate a positive and optimistic growth. Despite many issues that need to be improved, Vietnam is also in close proximity to the group of middle powers/medium-sized states in the region and the world (illustrated in Tables 2 and 3); if it maintains in the short and medium term its positive development momentum and proactive policies, acceding to this group is utterly within reach.

Diplomatic Behaviour. In terms of behaviour, Vietnam has been proving to be a dynamic player in regional and international institutions, as well as a reliable partner of many nations. In the global diplomatic index, Vietnam is ranked 38 of 61, and third in ASEAN (following Indonesia and Thailand) (Lowy Institute, 2019c). It is evident that

Table 1. Basic Indicators of Vietnam: 2008 vs. 2018.

	2008	2018
GDP (current international, in billion USD)	99.13	245.21
GDP growth (%)	5.7	7.1
GDP per capita (current international, USD/person)	4031	6608
Trade (% of GDP)	154	208
Surface area (per million km^2)	331	
Population (in millions)	86.24	95.54
Military expenditure (current international, in billion USD)	2138	5.5
HDI (ranking)	187	116

Source: The authors' compilation of data using the sources of World Bank (2019a, 2019b) and UNDP (2018).

building a middlepowership is beneficial for smaller countries in order to have more opportunities to engage in international affairs as well as to be relatively independent in relations with major countries. Recognising the incremental benefits of following the pathway to middlepowership, Vietnam has deployed relevant policies and started to demonstrate the stature of a middle power.

First, Vietnam has successfully promoted regional and global multilateralism. By quantitative metrics, Vietnam ranked third in terms of multilateral power[1] in ASEAN and tenth in Asia, proving its rising stature in the subregional and regional communities (Lowy Institute, 2019b). Evidently, a good understanding of multilateral mechanisms plays a crucial role in counteracting challenges and availing itself of opportunities which stemmed from interactions with great powers.

Vietnam's commitment to multilateralism is corroborated through internal arrangements. The political document of the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 2016 and the 2018 Directive No. 25-CT/TW of the Party Central Committee's Secretariat on promoting and enhancing the role of multilateral diplomacy by 2030 marked a climacteric in Vietnamese top officials' foreign policy mindset, as this was the first time multilateral diplomacy was identified as a key strategic direction to augment Vietnam's position in the international arena (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016; Party Central Committee's Secretariat, 2018). Vietnam's increasing contributions to UN peacekeeping forces not only shows the country's commitment to global peace and security, but also s its desire to be recognised as a formidable player, as this is a salient intimation that has contributed to the middlepowership of Canada and Australia since the time of the Cold War. A remarkable achievement is Vietnam's non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council (UNSC) for 2020–2021 tenure after securing 192 out of a total of 193 votes, the greatest landslide victory in the history of the UN. The country previously sat on that power apparatus during 2008–2009.

At the level of regional governance, ASEAN continues to be seen as "one of the pillars and priorities in the foreign policy of the Party and State" (Pham, 2012). ASEAN is an institutional tool that facilitates Vietnam taking on the typical roles of a middle power

Table 2. Hard Power of Middle Powers.

		Population		GDP (PPP)		GDP per capita (PPP)		GDP Growth		Military expenditure	
Country		Value (in millions)	Global ranking	Value (in billion USD)	Global ranking	Value (USD/ person)	Global ranking	Value (%)	Global ranking	Value (in billion USD)	Global ranking
Traditional middle power	*Italia*	60.48	23	2400	12	39,675	33	0.9	164	27.81	11
	Canada	36.99	38	1840	17	49,690	21	1.9	133	21.62	14
	Australia	25.17	53	1320	20	52,379	17	2.7	109	26.71	13
	The Netherlands	17.18	65	970.54	26	56,488	12	2.6	119	11.24	21
	Sweden	10.23	85	548.87	39	53,651	15	2.3	129	5.76	33
	Belgium	11.4	76	550.86	38	48,327	22	1.4	153	4.96	37
	Norway	5.32	113	395.87	46	74,357	6	1.3	156	7.07	28
	Denmark	5.78	108	302.23	58	52,278	18	1.5	147	4.23	42
Emerging middle power	*Brazil*	208.5	5	3370	8	16,146	81	1.1	161	27.77	12
	South Korea	51.63	27	2240	14	43,289	29	2.7	111	43.07	10
	Mexico	124.74	11	2570	11	20,616	65	2.0	130	6.59	31
	Indonesia	264.16	4	3500	7	13,234	98	5.2	38	7.44	26
	Turkey	82.00	19	2300	13	28,044	53	2.8	107	18.97	15
	South Africa	57.94	24	789.7	29	13,629	91	0.8	169	3.64	48
	Malaysia	32.39	43	1010	25	31,311	47	4.7	50	3.47	49
	Vietnam	*94.58*	*15*	*710.55*	*33*	*7513*	*126*	*7.1*	*12*	*5.50*	*35*

Source: The authors' compilation of data using the sources of IMF and SIPRI.

Table 3. Ranking of Vietnam and Some Middle Powers amongst 18 Asia–Pacific Countries in 2018[3].

	Vietnam	Malaysia	Indonesia	Australia	South Korea
GDP (PPP)	*12*	11	6	9	7
GDP per capita (PPP)	*15*	9	12	4	6
Trade (% of GDP)	*2*	3	15	14	7
Surface area	*10*	11	6	4	16
Population	*8*	12	4	13	11
Military expenditure	*11*	13	9	7	6
HDI	*14*	9	12	1	6
Participation in regional and international organisations	*10*	11	4	8	9

Source: The authors' compilation of data using the sources of World Bank, UNDP and Lowy Institute.

such as catalyser (bringing major countries to join the EAS, ARF, and other organisations), and coordinator (in ASEAN–US relations, ASEAN–China, and others), and initiator (ADMM + , among others) (Le, 2018). Vietnam has achieved sectoral leadership in the realm of international security through the management of the South China Sea issue, engaging Laos and Cambodia in the regional architecture and sustaining ASEAN's relevance as a regional security stakeholder (Emmers and Le, 2020: 12). The second US–DPRK Summit in 2019 was the pivotal juncture for Vietnam to construct the convening and mediating identity of a middle power. While assuming the role of a host, Vietnam learned to rationally engage in a sophisticated manner in later processes, including mediation.

Second, Vietnam is a strong advocate of an open and rules-based international order, another attestation of a quintessential middle power. As a developing country highly dependent on trade and foreign investment, Vietnam has always plugged its national interests into the multilateral trading system. As one of the most open economies in Asia, whose trade value is twice as high as its GDP, this non-capitalist country is currently a signatory to 16 high-standard FTAs such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the European Union–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), and others.

With regards to building a stable regional order, since the adoption of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002, Vietnam has always enshrined a rules-based maritime order constructed by peaceful and diplomatic processes and international laws and called on countries to uphold the international laws in the South China Sea, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the legal basis. Vietnam's calls to outlaw the establishment of any new Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea, even though rejected by China, is a "preemptive" move that will put Beijing under the scrutiny of the

international community should China continue illegal activities in the region and has stiffened Vietnam's proactive position in rule-taking (HH Le, 2019). Additionally, with respect to Mekong issues, Vietnam has anchored its rules-based stance to ensure water security and the implementation of sustainable development goals in conformity with international practices and laws, including the 1995 Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin, and in the spirit of respecting other parties' legitimate interests.

Third, in its interaction with major countries, Vietnam has actively created a delicate balance (Hiebert and Jin, 2018), not leaning towards one side to counterbalance the other. Vietnam has pursued proactive hedging through network diplomacy, establishing diplomatic ties with all five members of the UNSC, including former enemies, to foster comprehensive and strategic partnership with these nations. Notably, with rational thinking epitomised through the dialectical dissection of partner and object or cooperation and struggle, Vietnam has attempted to address the sensitive link between its self-reliance, self-independence, and the goal of building meaningful, long-lasting friendships and partnerships against the backdrop of the growing great powers rivalry.

To neutralise challenges stemming from nuanced and complex relations with major powers, a philosophy of clumping bamboo diplomacy, which means engaging the national interests of great powers to increase interdependence, thereby protecting national independence, has been tactically adopted in response to great powers competition (Vu, 2013).[2] Vietnam has been highly adept at exploiting benefits from its close relations with all great powers. It is making the most of the strategic moment in an era when the United States, the only superpower, can still act as a balancing and stabilising force in the region (Le, 2020a: 247), especially in regard to thorny security issues such as the South China Sea and the Mekong.

Fourth, Vietnam has accumulated substantial benefits from promoting horizontal cooperation with like-minded medium-sized countries. The intensification of bilateral cooperation with South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, European nations, and others has concretised the foreign policy line of multilateralisation and diversification of international relations to take the edge off the worst impulses of major powers competition (DT Le, 2019) and to reduce dependence on any one country. Australia's readiness to elevate strategic partnership with Vietnam on strategic issues of economy, defence, and security has positive impacts that extend beyond bilateral channels. Similar to other middle powers, Vietnam resisted bandwagoning with either the United States or China while also broadening its horizons and upgrading other partnerships as a guard against structural uncertainty.

Efficacy, Self-Reflection, and Others' Perceptions. Owing to its comprehensive international integration, Vietnam has vigorously reimagined its brand, successfully transforming the name of Vietnam from "a war" to "a country." However, the country is considered to lack a persistent self-identity as a middle power (Emmers and Teo, 2018). There are some powers that act like middle powers without labelling themselves as such

(Wilkins, 2018: 55). Looking to the case of South Korea, though cautious not to directly embrace the concept of "middle power" in official narratives, but under the impetus of a group of scholars, South Korean foreign policy has evinced various aspects of a middle power, from the country's being a "balancer" and "hub" (within the framework of the Northeast Asian initiative) under the Roo Moo-hyun government to a "convener," "conciliator," and "agenda-setter" (according to the overarching slogan of "Global Korea") under the Lee Myung-bak administration and the new Southern policy of the Moon Jae-in presidency (Howe and Park, 2019). Constrained by its historical experiences of once being considered as a regional hegemon, Vietnamese leaders have not officially identified the country as a middle power. Moreover, rather than claiming its rising middle-power status, the 13th National Party Congress set centenary goals of becoming a developing nation with modern industry and upper-middle-income status by 2030 and a developed nation with a high-income status by 2045, implying its aspiration to join the more powerful countries (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021). Additionally, a national brand as an active member of the international community backed up by archetypal identities of typical mid-tier countries acts as an impetus for Vietnam to reach the forward-looking international role. Internally, Directive 25-CT/TW of the Party Central Committee's Secretariat on promoting and enhancing the role of multilateral diplomacy serves as a watershed in the process of institutionalisation of Vietnam's self-identity as a middle power.

A remarkable success is that in the policy-planning and academic communities, Vietnam has recently been positioned in the middle-power group. In the context of escalating strife between the United States as a status quo power and China as a rising power, Vietnam is seen as an important partner of both great powers and middle powers. Specifically, one of the motives consolidating the United States' firm interest in the relationship with Vietnam is the recognition that the latter is becoming a "middle power" with commensurate influence in Southeast Asia (Manyin, 2014: 4). Former Secretary-General of ASEAN Ong Keng Yong and Chinese professor Jin Canrong analogously argued that China has paid more attention to promoting cooperation with individual middle powers such as Vietnam and Indonesia than with the ASEAN bloc as a whole. Other medium-range countries including Australia and India are also recommended to forge and spur horizontal cooperation with Vietnam to mitigate security challenges in the region (Medcalf and Mohan, 2014).

In multilateral forums, Vietnam has emerged as one of the increasingly important members of ASEAN with the potential to reinvigorate the association in facing their key economic and security challenges, Vietnam being arguably "the most capable and determined state to challenge China's claims in the South China Sea" (Le, 2016). At the 2013 ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM), Vietnam was praised as an emerging middle power and a significant player in the region (Chen and Ratnam, 2013). Vietnam has also been invited several times to attend the G7 and G20 Summit, the forums of the world's most powerful nations. Barbara Kratiuk suggests that Vietnam should be considered as a middle power because it has met the criteria of capacity and political will to actively participate in regional and global governance (Kratiuk,

2014). Similarly, Ralf Emmers and Sarah Teo also selected Vietnam as one of four case studies of middle powers in the Asia–Pacific region, as along with Indonesia, Vietnam satisfies four criteria of the middle-power category but only three criteria of a small country (Emmers and Teo, 2014: 190). Even in terms of nation-branding, Leif-Eric Easley has also recognised that Vietnam is building up the national identity of a medium-range power, reflected within the framework of global governance and East Asian regionalism (Easley, 2012: 422). Other studies also recognise Vietnam's role – for example, Richard Haass, refers to Vietnam as a regional power together with India and Japan (Haass, 2019: 30). Since Vietnam hosted the second US–DPRK summit (2019), the impression of the country as a middle power has become more vivid.

Using the aforementioned analytical framework, the article comes to contend that Vietnam has attained some material and non-material standards of a typical middle power. The country has already superseded the "small country" label and is located among the medium-sized states.

Amid COVID-19: Middle-Power Moment and Vietnam's Chance to Lift Its International Status

The COVID-19 pandemic has further thrown international relations into chaos and exacerbated the uncertainty and sensitivity of the international system, accelerating the power shift and dispersion from the West to the East and from the North to the South. Whatever the ensuing configuration of the international system is, the transition of the global order is irreversible, with more complicated variables increasingly intensified by the pandemic.

According to systemic theory, the structure of the international system rules over every nation's policies (Mearsheimer, 2001: 17) and structural changes affect not only major powers but all actors within the system (Hansen, 2012: 12). COVID-19 is a systemic change that excludes neither the greatest nor the weakest countries. Nevertheless, to convert challenges into opportunities is a question of statecraft; in this context, middle powers have triumphed. They score a win in a chaotic world by adopting "the Dolphin Strategy" (Lynch, 1990), which is characterised by smartness, adaptiveness, responsiveness, and visionariness. They see opportunities where their larger and smaller counterparts see threats.

As Tanguy Struye de Swielande argues, a transitional world order characterised by changing dynamics opens a window of opportunities for non-great powers to pursue more ambitious international goals (Swielande, 2019: 23). In the context of the global leadership vacuum, secondary powers have endeavoured to punch above their weights to take advantage of the moment (West, 2020). By joining forces on initiatives such as pledging support for a global vaccination drive, calling for an inquiry into the WHO's response to the initial outbreak, and navigating multilateral institutions towards an international public health agenda, middle powers have embodied a strong willingness to fill the G20 moment during the pandemic (Brattberg, 2021: 219–220). If they can translate

their initial diplomatic efforts into sustained reactions to the future phases of the pandemic, middle powers are believed to succeed in driving the world out of the crisis (Jones, 2020). Under the Biden administration, middle powers can play the role of the contingent partners for the United States to "diplomatically engage with, plug into, and lead" (Brattberg, 2021: 231). The rise of middle powers, especially the emerging ones, stems primarily from their proactivism and internationalism in lieu of their absolute power, compared to larger powers.

Crises triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic present not only challenges but also opportunities for such countries possessing limited capacity to be more resolute in pursuing a true middle-power diplomacy for the sake of its national interests. In other words, middle-power diplomacy is a crucial tool in the face of adversity.

Capacity: COVID-19 as a Barometer of Vietnam's Resilience and Adaptability. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the world economy, including the most resilient developed economies. Nonetheless, from a comparative perspective, Vietnam's resilience in the first three waves of the pandemic is a bright spot amongst dark shades in the world panorama. Facing the coronavirus, with the motto of preventing the pandemic, ensuring the health of the people, preventing economic slowdown, maintaining social stability, and striving to achieve the highest goals and socio-economic development tasks in 2020, Vietnam is one of the few countries aside from China to record net positive GDP growth, at 2.91 per cent, becoming ASEAN's fourth-largest economy (IMF, 2021) (Table 4).

As theoretically and practically parsed above, population is a long-term indicator to access the potential capacity of a middle power. Thanks to its prompt, timely, and effective prevention and control during the first three waves of the pandemic compared to the rest of the world, Vietnam has been doing well in the quest to minimise fatalities and protect citizens both at home and abroad.

The Delta variant is considered to have reversed the fruits of emerging powers, including Vietnam. In tandem with Australia, Taiwan, and New Zealand, which have boasted success stories in containing the pandemic, Vietnam has been more vulnerable in the fourth wave. The slow vaccination rate is the "Achilles heel" of emerging middle powers such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. The Vietnamese government is now accelerating its free-for-all vaccination campaign. However, it should be noted

Table 4. Economic Growth Forecast by IMF. Unit: %.

	2019	2020	2021 (January)	2021 (October)	2022
World output	2.9	−3.5	5.5	5.9	4.9
Emerging and developing Asia	5.5	−1.1	8.3	7.2	6.3
ASEAN-5	4.9	−3.7	5.2	2.9	5.8
Vietnam	7	2.4	6.7	3.8	6.6

that Vietnam's middlepowership had begun to be constructed even prior to COVID-19. The pandemic is not a setback for Vietnam's middle-power status but has rather spurred the country's further determination to work towards a true style of middle-power statecraft with the goal of improving security, development, and prestige. It is necessary to separate the short-term and medium-to-long-term factors in assessing the impact of the pandemic. In the medium and long run, Vietnam remains an attractive destination for investment and benefits from the way COVID-19 affected global supply.

Diplomatic Behaviour: COVID-19 as a Catalyst of a More Proactive and Creative Diplomacy. In 2020 Vietnam registered the largest improvement in diplomatic influence, ranking 9/26 (Lowy Institute, 2020b). The COVID-19 pandemic provided a seismic shock that has exerted a strong reverberation on the international system, forcing Vietnam to promptly adopt a foreign policy in response to the changing situation. By continuing to act as middle power, Vietnam has contributed to regional peace and stability despite being threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic, and even managed to secure its long-term interests. According to former deputy prime minister Vu Khoan, Vietnam's three strategic objectives have long been security, development, and prestige. In retrospect, development and security-driven strategies usually prevailed at the policy debate in previous Party Congresses. More recently, Vietnam's diplomacy has focused on its orientation towards improving the country's influence in the regional and international arena, of which becoming a middle power is its implicit objective (DT Le and Lai, 2021). The 13th National Party Congress is the first-ever mentioning of the pioneering role of diplomacy in realising Vietnam's three aforementioned strategic objectives. This diplomacy-focused approach in safeguarding the nation and mobilising resources for prosperity is a feature of a typical middle power and an effective way to help Vietnam realise its "Dolphin Strategy."

First, multilateralism remains an irreversible approach. In 2020 Vietnam was entrusted with the dual weighty responsibilities of non-permanent member of the UN and ASEAN Rotational Chair. Secretary-General and State President Nguyen Phu Trong emphasised that in order to fulfil the responsibility assigned by the international community, it is necessary to identify diplomacy in international institutions as one of the most crucial political tasks of the Party and State. Although states tend to act more egocentrically in the name of protecting national security, the pandemic reaffirmed that only strong international collaboration could rehabilitate the globe.

Despite the recent challenges, Vietnam maintained a firm commitment to globalism in the time of volatile global order. Most notably, Vietnam offered two initiatives, including holding a ministerial-level open debate on observing the UN Charter, adopting the first Chairperson's Statement on the UN Charter, and organising the first meeting between the UN and ASEAN to promote collaboration. A joint speech with Indonesia as a non-permanent member of the UNSC spotlights ASEAN's role at the UN's most powerful body, bringing synergy and cohesiveness between ASEAN and the UN in tackling some of the most critical and sensitive issues that intersect both levels. Vietnam is the

main author of the initiative for the International Day of Epidemic Preparedness, along with 107 other countries as co-sponsors.

Vietnam's determination to elevate its status in Southeast Asia as ASEAN Rotating Chair in 2020 was considered to have been derailed by COVID-19. In fact, the pandemic has added another concern to already crowded agendas in need of addressing by the Chair. However, given its performance since the beginning of 2020, Vietnam was believed to be competent to hold the ASEAN Chair for two consecutive years (Hutt, 2020b). It has timely adjusted the focus of cooperation within the bloc to match the ongoing COVID-19 situation, evidenced by the issuance of the Chair's Statement on ASEAN Collective Response to the Outbreak of COVID-19. It quickly converted face-to-face conferences to online meetings, then proactively came up with initiatives and suggested cooperative mechanisms. At the ASEAN and ASEAN + 3 Special Summit on COVID-19 Response, ASEAN countries reached consensus including on the establishment of a COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies and Equipment, the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for Public Health Emergencies Response, and a framework to move forward ASEAN's comprehensive efforts to recover from the impact of COVID-19. In addition, Vietnam's rotational chairmanship of ASEAN has increasingly spurred advocates of discussing the Mekong issue in ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms. Some analysts portray the Mekong issue as Hanoi's second foremost foreign policy priority after the South China Sea (Phan, 2021).

Second, the embracing of an open and rules-based international order continues to be Vietnam's foremost commitment to counter the resurgence of nationalism fuelled by COVID-19. In recent years, Vietnam has accelerated international economic integration. With 16 FTAs under implementation and negotiation, Vietnam has become a node of a crowded network of free trade areas that represent 59 per cent of the world's population and 68 per cent of global trade, contributing to increasing Vietnam's intertwined interests with most leading regional and international partners. As mentioned above, in addition, along with Singapore, Vietnam plays a key role and is a driving force in the region vis-à-vis moving towards signing high-standard trade deals.

Above and beyond, middle powers seem, under certain circumstances, more serious than their larger counterparts in terms of their ability to achieve equitable and sustainable solutions to global and regional problems (Le, 2020b). This analysis fits the current context as while the majority of the world remains preoccupied with fighting against coronavirus, China has continued to illegally push its military objectives in the South China Sea. Together with other middle powers, Vietnam has been increasingly assertive in reaffirming that international law is a framework for resolving international conflicts and maintaining peace and stability for the region and the world. It should be noted that China is Vietnam's largest trading partner.

Third, while the Indo-Pacific has become the focal point for heightening US–China friction, which agitates the world a new type of cold war, middle powers' behaviours in the region have drawn special attention. Australia has further leaned towards the United States since it was the first country to call for an independent investigation into the pandemic's origins, in defiance of economic retaliation from China (for instance,

prohibiting imports of items from Australia and urging Chinese students not to come back to Australia to study, and so on). Other middle-tier countries such as Indonesia, New Zealand, South Africa, Korea, Turkey also responded to this call.

Bilateral ties have flourished since the establishment of the US–Vietnam comprehensive partnership in 2013. The US supported Vietnam's strong and constructive leadership, especially the virtual ASEAN–US Special Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the Coronavirus Disease 2019 and the first-ever ASEAN–US Health Ministers' Meeting; the Women, Peace, and Security Conference; and Vietnam's efforts to elevate the Mekong subregion within ASEAN. Notwithstanding COVID-19, the two nations continue to expand security cooperation in areas such as addressing the war legacy, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and defence and security dialogues. The second visit by US aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and guided-missile cruiser USS Bunker Hill to Vietnam is a symbolic gesture but a necessary development.

In relations with China, Vietnam seems to be cautious and delicate in the context of rising rhetorics disadvantageous to China. Despite its close proximity to China, it did not join the alliance for investigating China as the initial spreader of COVID-19. Vietnam has also adopted a rational-choice theory in its policy paradigm, taking advantage of economic cooperation with China. In contradiction to some discourses that Vietnam has capitalised on the supply-chain shift from China, Vietnam itself did not preclude China from restructuring the regional supply chain, as evidenced in ASEAN + 3 joint statements. The efficacy of Vietnam's equilibrium act is its protection of paramount national interests including sovereignty, security, prosperity, and international credibility as a trusted partner and friend. China welcomed Vietnam's efforts as Chair in ASEAN–China Cooperation and ASEAN + 3 mechanisms.

Fourth, the orientation of multilateralisation and diversification of international relations has still been effectively implemented by Vietnam through increased cooperation between Vietnam and other counterparts. Regardless of the pandemic, on virtual platform, Vietnam has successfully upgraded its Strategic Partnership with New Zealand, thereby making a burgeoning diplomatic network of 3 Comprehensive Strategic Partners, 14 Strategic Partners and 13 Comprehensive Partners. In their joint statement, the South China Sea and the UNCLOS 1982 were highlighted, which indicates their shared vision of regional peace and security. At the multilateral level, Vietnam, in collaboration with Indonesia, made two joint statements – one on cooperation between the UN and the EU, and one about the Central African situation, showing the horizontal collaboration of medium-sized states to consolidate stances in global governance.

The pioneering role of the diplomatic sector has been manifested in vaccine diplomacy, which not only deals with vaccine access but also opens up opportunities for technology transfer and production of domestic vaccines. The efficacy is illustrated by the approximately 90 million doses of vaccines received till October 2021 and nearly 35 million doses in the next month.[3] Hanoi's foreign policy proactivism is a bright spot on the otherwise sombre picture of COVID-19, showing that its middle-power activism is not obstructed by the disavantageous circumstance.

Table 5. Vietnam Before and Amid COVID-19.

	Before the pandemic	**Amid the pandemic**
Capacity	Medium-range capability (main indicators range from lower-middle group to upper-middle group) Potential spaces to improve its strength High potential	During the first three waves of the pandemic: Preliminary control of the pandemic nationwide to enter the new normal Adaptability and resilience to the pandemic A significant enhancement of comparative power (both hard and soft power) compared to other peers High potential growth
Diplomatic Behavior	Proactively joining and contributing in multilateral organisations Upholding the rules-based international order Adopting hedging and equilibrium strategies in relationships with great powers Diversifying its diplomatic network through horizontal cooperation with middle-power counterparts	Pursuing (sectoral) leadership in regional and global institutions to counter the pandemic Strongly advocating the open and rules-based international order challenged by the pandemic Consistently adopting a balanced approach in interaction with great powers on the basis of national interests and international responsibility (showing a stronger stance if necessary but not deviating from the non-alignment principle) Reinforcing collaboration with like-minded counterparts in multilateral forums, especially in post-pandemic recovery Diplomacy is a pillar of statecraft for the sake of security, development and prestige
Self-perception and others' perceptions	Self-identity: reluctant and ambivalent, but constituted some crucial elements of identity Others' perceptions: internationally identified as an emerging middle power	Self-conceptualisation: still non-publicised but gradually identified by Vietnamese scholars and potentially, policymakers Others' reflections: increasingly recognised as an aspiring middle power and an effective model to fight against COVID-19

Self-Reflection and Others' Perceptions: COVID-19 as an Opportunity to Popularise Vietnam's National Brand. Despite its hesitation to self-conceptualise as a middle power, the constitutive and intersubjective identities of Vietnam are on clear display. In nation-branding, diplomacy is an embarking point and a foundation. Vietnam's

consistent pursuit of the foreign policy line of independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation, and development – of which multilateralism, a rules-based order, and a web of diplomatic networks are of great amplitude – has demonstrated its stature as one of an emerging middle power (DT Le and Vu, 2020: 128).

Vietnam has realised the identity of an emerging middle power in many aspects, such as an initiator (at forums such as the UN and ASEAN), a bridge (between the UN and ASEAN), a norms diffuser (of international laws), an agenda setter (in international and regional institutions), and so on. Perhaps these are all strong tokens that Vietnam is increasingly suited to greater international responsibility. According to Alexander Vuving, the pandemic has been a great opportunity for Vietnam to enhance its soft power, as it helped to broadcast Vietnam's generous behaviour towards the international community (Hutt, 2020a). It is plausible that professional medical or mask diplomacy might be translated into Vietnam's niche diplomacy, as theorised by functional perspectives (Table 5).

Conclusion

Both before and amid COVID-19, the concept of an emerging middle power has been used to support Vietnam's aspiration to increase its influence. We emphasise that even prior to the outbreak of coronavirus, in terms of capacity, behaviour, and identity, Vietnam has proved the stature of a potential medium-sized state. More importantly, the article seeks to answer the puzzle of whether the COVID-19 pandemic is a catalyst, further upraising Vietnam's international role as an aspiring middle power. Both theoretical references and empirical evidence demonstrate the truth that for a nation that has long sought the international community's acknowledgment of its standing, the pandemic has presented the country an opportunity in crisis. It created not only favourable conditions for development but challenges of adaptability and innovation that are forcing the country to deal with entering the new normal.

From the power-based approach, COVID-19 constitutes a litmus test for Vietnam's economic and social resilience. During the first three waves of the pandemic, applying a prudent and low-cost model in response to the pandemic, Vietnam had minimised the adverse repercussions of COVID-19 to soon devote itself to economic resuscitation. Vietnam had long entered the "new normal" compared to the rest, allowing it to revitalise from shock and realise planned strategies. The breakout of the Delta variant shows Vietnam's limited hard power. The temporary setback, however, does not prevent Vietnam from embarking on structural elements to continue its middle power trajectory.

With respect to diplomatic behaviours, the COVID-19 pandemic has attested to Vietnam's proactive and creative diplomacy, which has been indicated by its adaptive capability to the global upheaval. As the epidemic has an enormous impact on international agendas, Vietnam must expeditiously adjust its diplomatic activities multilaterally and bilaterally. Incipient but important fruits in the UN and ASEAN have betokened the improving status of Vietnam. Also, the adoption of horizontal collaboration with like-minded fellows shows its strategic approach to not enmesh itself in

great powers rivalry and to diversify benefits with post–COVID-19 recovery in mind. Its activism in vaccine diplomacy is an asset, as it shows that an emerging middle power with limited resources can use diplomacy as a tool to improve both its hard and soft power.

Through the lens of identity constructivists, Vietnam has yet to label itself as such in the official rhetoric, but from a research perspective, a country knowing what it can and should do helps itself reposition. The case of COVID-19 robustly instantiates in this regard. Vietnam's internationally extolled response to COVID-19 during the first three waves of COVID-19 is an opportune moment for the world to recognise Vietnam's significance as a regional actor and its attractiveness and competency as an emerging middle power. In addition, a strategic question for Vietnam policymakers and scholars is whether it is time for the country to boldly put an end to its self-identity as a small-sized state in order to vigorously change itself and avoid a possible identity dilemma.

As diplomacy is identified as a pioneering force in preserving a peaceful and stable international environment, in mobilising external support for the course of national building, and in enhancing the country's status and prestige, it seems that the behaviour-based approach is much preferred by Vietnam to establish its middlepowership. The pandemic acts a catalyst for Vietnam to actively improve its diplomacy and construct its image as a middle power, while the aspect of capacity is affected to some extent by unpredictable factors.

Perhaps the idea of a middle power will help construct an innovative and creative mindset for Vietnam to strive to reach out further, at least diplomatically, especially when new motivations are needed to reinvigorate the post-pandemic world.

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1 This submeasure examines membership in selected summits, diplomatic clubs, and intergovernmental organisations, as well as financial contributions to the UN and development banks and voting alignment with other countries in UN resolutions.

2 According to Vietnam's former deputy prime minister Vu Khoan, "the more interdependent ties we [Vietnam] can cultivate, the easier we can maintain our independence and self-reliance, like an ivory bamboo that will easily fall by standing alone but grow firmly in clumps."

3 Statistics from Vietnam's Working Group on Vaccine Diplomacy.

4 Eight criteria and 18 countries selected are based on research of (Emmers and Teo, 2014) and (Ping, 2005). Eighteen countries (including great powers, middle powers, and small countries) are: the United States, China, Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, Russia, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Vietnam, New Zealand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Brunei, and Laos.

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Author Biographies

Le Dinh Tinh is Director General, Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies - Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam (DAV) and serves on several advisory boards in the field of foreign policy. Previously, he was Deputy Director General at the Bien Dong Institute for Maritime Studies. He obtained his Ph.D from DAV, MPA from the University of Hawaii, was a degree fellow at the East West Center (funded by the ADB) during 2002–2004. He has published his writings on the *Diplomat, Global Asia, East Asia Forum, ISEAS Perspective, CSIS CogitAsia, Issues and Insights, the World Today-Chatham House, Maritime Issues, Interpreter, Routledge, Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Southeast Asian Affairs* and peer-reviewed journals such as *Contemporary Southeast Asia, Asian Affairs, and Strategic Analysis*. His latest book *"American Foreign Policy: A Neo-realist Interpretation and the Case of Viet Nam since Normalization"* was published in 2020. He can be reached at: tinhdl@dav.edu.vn and/or Le Dinh Tinh, Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam, 69 Chua Lang, Dong Da, Hanoi, Viet Nam.

Vu Thi Thu Ngan is Research Fellow at the Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies - Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam (DAV). A graduate from DAV, she has participated in a number of research projects. She has co-authored (with Le Dinh Tinh) two academic papers, namely "Khái niệm cường quốc tầm trung và liên hệ với Việt Nam" [The concept of a middle power and the Vietnamese context]. *Tạp chí Lý luận Chính trị [Political Theory]* 3: 123–129, and "Hoạch định chiến lược đối ngoại: Lý thuyết, thực tiễn và hàm ý cho Việt Nam trong bối cảnh hội nhập quốc tế sâu rộng [Formulation of Foreign Policy Strategy: Theory, Practice, and Research Implications for Vietnam in its Comprehensive International Integration]. *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Quốc tế [International Studies]* 3 (122): 15–45. She can be reached at nganvu@dav.e-du.vn and/or Vu Thi Thu Ngan, Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam, 69 Chua Lang, Dong Da, Hanoi, Viet Nam.