



More than just hedging? The reactions of Cambodia and Vietnam to the power struggle between the United States and China in times of Obama's “pivot to Asia”

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Funding information

Západočeská Univerzita v Plzni,
Grant/Award Number: SGS 2021-015
Podpora tvůrčí činnosti studentů

Abstract

Southeast Asia is a major theater in the superpower rivalry between China and the United States. The states in this region face the challenge how to react to this intensified strategic competition. Some authors suggest a concept of hedging as the main behavioral response of the region. Nevertheless, critics argue that just one concept cannot incorporate all the variation in their behavior. They often name Cambodia and Vietnam as problematic examples – Cambodia rather bandwagoning with China and Vietnam being more a balancer than a hedger. The goal of this article is to create original operational definition of hedging that would address existing limitations through a comparison of the foreign policy of Cambodia and Vietnam during the US pivot to Asia during the Barrack Obama administration. This article finds that hedging can be useful to analyze the responses of Southeast Asian states despite the perceived contradictory stances of Cambodia and Vietnam.

KEYWORDS

Vietnam, Cambodia, China, hedging, United States



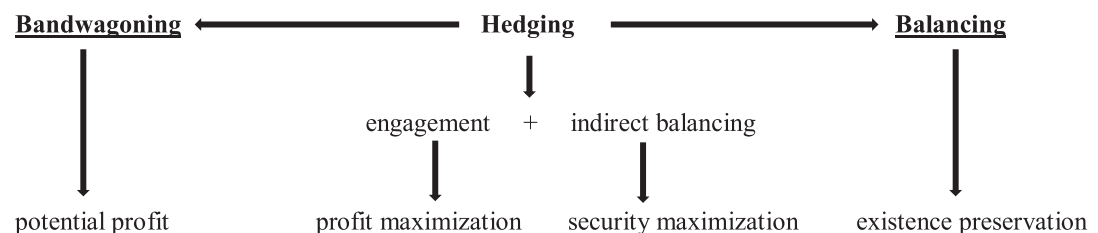
INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is a region, where the rise in power of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is apparent. Beijing aims at forming a Sinocentric sphere of influence as it pushes its ideas about a shape of regional order in an increasingly assertive way. However, its rise collides with a dominant position of the United States (US) that implements its version of a rules-based regional order in the Asia-Pacific in a form of the hub-and-spokes system. A region is also relevant to many US strategic interests that could be potentially threatened by China’s rise and prompt reaction from Washington, naturally. How do small states react to the situation? There is no agreement among scholars whether they balance against China, align with it, or bandwagon with it (Goh, 2007/2008: 115; Murphy, 2017: 165). Classical theories of international relations usually offer two possibilities as the answer— balancing or bandwagoning (Kuik, 2008: 160; Lim & Cooper, 2015: 701). In the case of Southeast Asia, some scholars choose a strategy of hedging instead. They understand it as a middle position and alternative to the previous two concepts that better reflect the interests of small states as they stand before the need to react to the ongoing changes in power distribution in the region (Tables 1–8).

My hypothesis is based on a presumption, that a concept of hedging can be used for explaining foreign policy strategies of countries in Southeast Asia toward the US–China power rivalry (for a simplification, the affiliation to the region is expressed by the membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations[ASEAN]). Here I follow in thoughts presented by Cheng-Chwee Kuik. He emphasizes hedging is an obvious choice for smaller states for two main reasons: First, pure balancing is not considered as strategically necessary, because the “China threat” is rather seen as potential than a real danger. Second, pure bandwagoning is considered too strategically risky as it restricts the freedom of conduct of those secondary states (2008: 159–161). I also draw inspiration from John G. Ikenberry, who claims “middle states” simply do not want to take a grand strategic choice. The established dual hierarchy, when the United States serves as a provider of security, while China offers interesting economic incentives, suits them best. For it is a strategic setting that gives them more space for maneuvering, bargaining, and pursuing their own goals as the two great powers compete for their political support. Policies leading to a strict hierarchy would give a leading state a monopoly on power and, therefore, limit their options. That is why, preserving the current power stalemate is in the interest of those middle states, and hedging strategy serves as a tool for it (2016: 34–36).

However, in my consideration of a setting and changes of the regional order, it is important to consider the objections related to two basic problems. The first one is expressed by an

TABLE 1 The concept of hedging scheme with tools and aims



Source: Author.



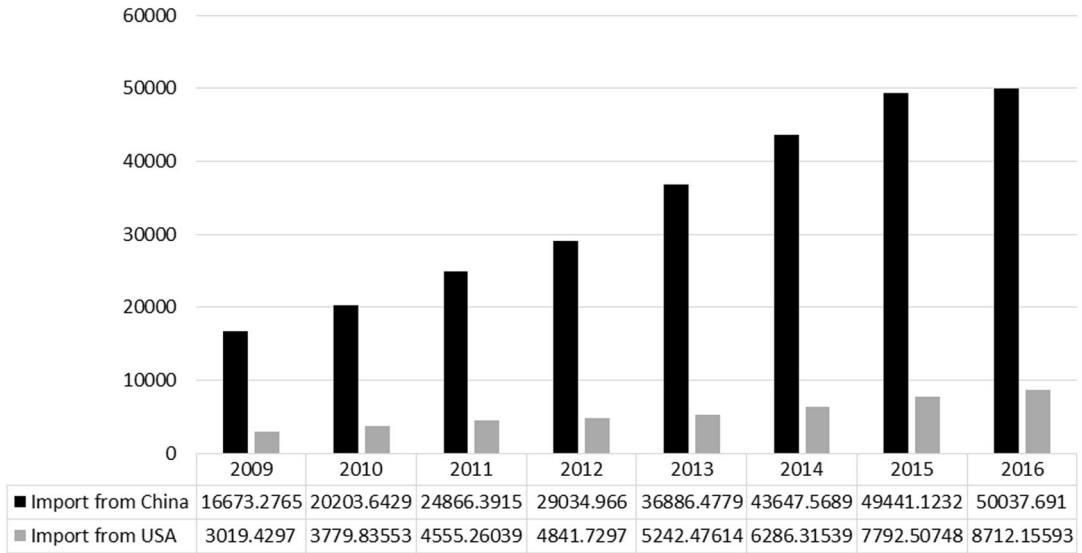
TABLE 2 Observed variables (table made by author)

Hedging	Existence of an official strategy or other document implying hedging	
	Profit maximization	Security maximization
	Target state	Hedge state
Sector	Tools (engagement)	Tools (balancing)
Political	International treaties of amity and cooperation with a target state; initiation/participation in international organizations with a target state; head of the state/government/member of government visits + mutual summits	Strengthening of amicable relations with other countries through international treaties (with hedge state mainly); summits and establishing of international organizations with exclusive membership (without target state, with hedge state); head of the state/government/member of government visits + mutual summits
Economic	Liberalization of mutual trade through the signing of international treaties; creation of cooperative international economic organizations or expert bodies with a target state; The volume of mutual trade + its direct (increase of export and import) with a target state; Increase of FDI; foreign aid	Liberalization of trade with a hedge state and other actors; creation of cooperative international economic organizations or expert bodies with exclusive membership (without target state, but with hedge state); the volume of mutual trade + its direct (increase of export and import) with a hedge state; Increase of FDI; foreign aid
Military	Treaties on military cooperation and consultations; initiation/participation in military drills with the exclusion of a hedge state; official visits and meetings of ministers of defense and chiefs of staff (or their equivalents); acquisitions and donations of military hardware + training programs	Treaties on military cooperation and consultations; initiation/participation in military drills with the exclusion of a target state; official visits and meetings of ministers of defense and chiefs of staff (or their equivalents); acquisitions and donations of military hardware + training programs; increasing of internal military capacity through military budget increase and acquisitions of military hardware; positioning against power and military activities of a target state
	Direction to bandwagoning	Direction to balancing

unclear anchorage of hedging, pointing out its insufficiently rigorous character in comparison to other concepts, which decreases its relevance as an analytical tool. The second one consists of concrete examples of foreign policy strategies of a few states. Their behavior in the international environment evokes either a choice of other more straightforward strategies or a long-term inclination of actors to the border poles of the balancing-bandwagoning spectrum. These facts hint at the time and functional limitations of hedging as a general and widely applicable strategy of Southeast Asia states.

I am going to focus my attention on just two countries, that are mentioned as prime examples of the inaccuracy of my hypothesis—Cambodia, and Vietnam. These states are situated on opposite poles of the balancing-bandwagoning spectrum. While Vietnam is

TABLE 3 Import into Vietnam in million USD



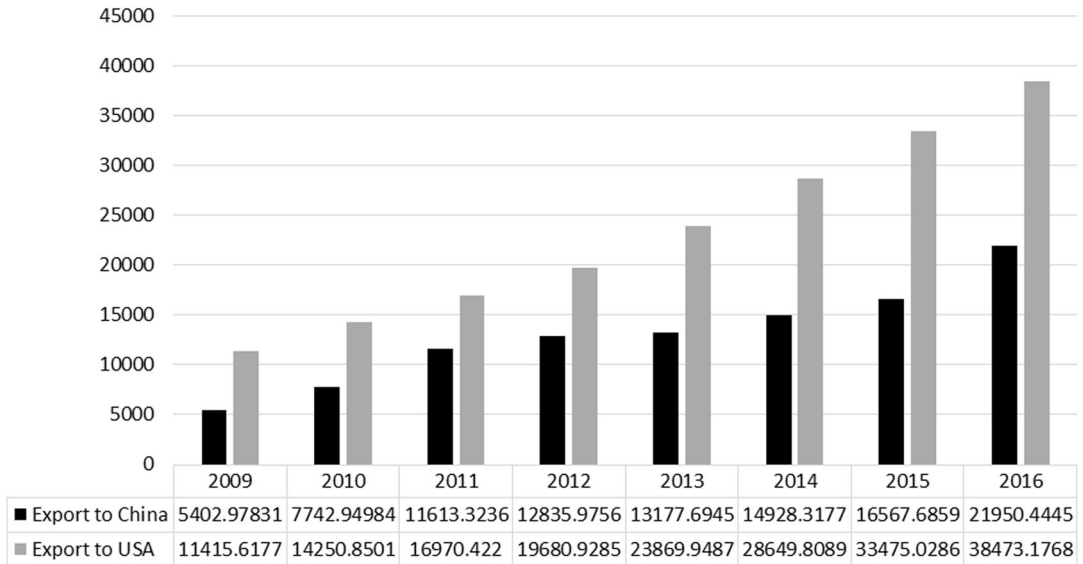
Source: Author. Data: World Bank.

mentioned as an actor heading to the balancing pole, Cambodia is considered as inclining to bandwagoning. This case selection is based on a choice of the least probable examples of following the hedging strategy from the whole group of Southeast Asian states. If my analysis detected elements of hedging in foreign policies of these disputable examples, my hypothesis would be approved, because there were no serious doubts expressed in cases of other states of that group.

Relating to the time demarcation, this article focuses on Barack Obama’s US presidential tenure (2009–2017), when the pivot/rebalance to Asia was announced. The reason is obvious—the move highlighted the opinions of some senior presidential advisors (associated in the “Phoenix Initiative”) that Asia should have played a central role in the US national security debate, declared the establishment of an “Asia-first policy” as a dominant paradigm and offered reaffirmation and expansion of security commitments to allies and potential partners in the region (Green, 2019: 519; Ikenberry, 2016: 38). What is more, it significantly enhanced the rivalry between the United States and China, as it “surprised Beijing and stimulated it to increase China’s presence across multiple spheres and countries in the region” (Shambaugh, 2018: 95). As David Shambaugh emphasizes, Chinese growing concerns were expressed by conveying the “Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference” of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee in October 2013. The unusual inclusion of the issue into the agenda of the platform reflected the importance of the American pivot for the highest echelons of the CCP (2018: 95–96). Simply saying, Obama’s rebalance not only announced the changes in US foreign policy priorities but also stimulated heightened Chinese activity as a reaction. That led to a significant change in US–China relations and the power dynamics of the whole Asia-Pacific region—marking a tipping point for the majority of actors. Southeast Asia and its power environment were no exception. The new collision of interests of the two great powers presented the small/secondary states there with three choices of reaction:



TABLE 4 Export from Vietnam in million USD



Source: Author. Data: World Bank.

- (1) Endorse the American rebalance and signalize alignment to the United States.
- (2) Oppose it and align to China.
- (3) Avoid any clear alignment and maintain its actions ambiguous (Lim & Cooper, 2015: 713).

That is why it makes sense to focus on Obama's presidential tenure. A succession of Donald Trump and Joe Biden then led to other changes in US foreign policy, that the Southeast Asian states had to react to with adjustments to their strategies. Nevertheless, any reflection of those changes would require a deeper analysis exceeding the scope of this article by a long shot. Thus, it is impossible to seize it analytically here. However, I am convinced this fact does not decrease the value of my research.

This article has two goals, reflecting the above-mentioned criticism. First, it provides a new functional operational definition of hedging, that would be rigorous enough to offer a relevant analytical usage. The second goal is to find out whether the reactions of Cambodia and Vietnam to the changes in regional order in Southeast Asia can be defined as hedging, or they are exceptional and can be potentially used as an argument supporting the criticism of the overly extensive application of hedging.

Is it possible to define the foreign policy strategies of Cambodia and Vietnam toward the United States and China in the years 2009–2017 as hedging?

Were the foreign policies of researched states following any specifically defined strategy reacting to the changes of power environment in Southeast Asia? If positive, did those contain elements of hedging?

What strategies did Cambodia and Vietnam use toward United States and China (in three researched sectors)?

What were the mutual relations of those strategies (were they complementary or contradictory)?



TABLE 5 Vietnam: Hedging—Dual-track policy and middle position (table made by author)

Hedging		Existence of an official strategy or other document implying hedging		Yes	
Profit maximization		Security maximization			
Target state (China)		Hedge (United States)			
Sector	Tools	Engagement	Balancing	Tools	
Political	International treaties of amity and cooperation with a target state	Yes	Yes	Strengthening of amicable relations with other countries through international treaties (with hedge state mainly)	
	Initiation/participation in international organizations with a target state	Yes	Yes	Summits and establishing of international organizations with exclusive membership (without target state, with hedge state)	
	Head of the state/government/member of government visits + mutual summits	Yes	Yes	Head of the state/government/member of government visits + mutual summits	
Economic	Liberalization of mutual trade through the signing of international treaties	Yes	Yes	Liberalization of trade with a hedge state and other actors	
	Creation of cooperative international economic organizations or expert bodies with a target state	Yes	Yes	Creation of cooperative international economic organizations or expert bodies with exclusive membership (without target state, but with hedge state)	
	The volume of mutual trade + its direct (increase of export and import) with a target state	Yes	Yes	The volume of mutual trade + its direct (increase of export and import) with a hedge state	
	Increase of FDI	Yes ^a	Yes	Increase of FDI	
	Foreign aid	Yes ^b	Yes	Foreign aid	

(Continues)



TABLE 5 (Continued)

Military	Treaties on military cooperation and consultations	Yes	Yes	Treaties on military cooperation and consultations
	Initiation/participation in military drills with the exclusion of a hedge state	Yes	Yes	Initiation/participation in military drills with the exclusion of a target state
	Official visits and meetings of ministers of defense and chiefs of staff (or their equivalents)	Yes	Yes	Official visits and meetings of ministers of defense and chiefs of staff (or their equivalents)
	Acquisitions and donations of military hardware + training programs	Yes	? ^c	Acquisitions and donations of military hardware + training programs
			? ^d	Increasing of internal military capacity through military budget increase and acquisitions of military hardware
			Yes ^e	Positioning against power and military activities of a target state
	Direction to bandwagoning			Direction to balancing

^aExact data about Chinese FDI cannot be assessed, used methodology does not discern between investment and foreign aid.

^bChina does not give exact numbers about the range and composition of foreign aid (data do not correspond with western standards).

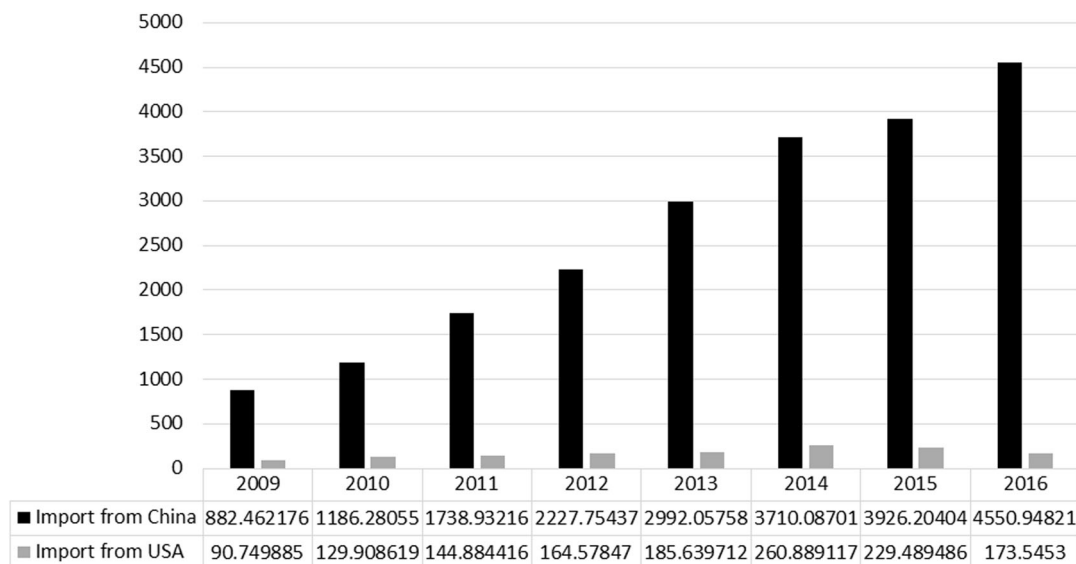
^cMilitary hardware sales were limited by a US lethal-weapons ban—partly lifted in 2014, fully in 2016.

^dThere are no data for all observed years in the database—because of acquisitions, it can be presumed the budget was increased.

^eHanoi expressed concerns about Chinese activities in the South China Sea regularly—it avoided mentioning it by name, however.



TABLE 6 Import into Cambodia in million USD



Source: Author. Data: World Bank.

Were those strategies identical with policies of hedging? If positive—why was it hedging and not any other strategy? If negative—why did not the strategy contain the elements of hedging?

These additional questions concern the core aspects of hedging, which is generally understood as a simultaneous and deliberate application of contradictory policies. Thus, if these aspects could not be found in the actions of researched states, then their strategies would not correspond with hedging.

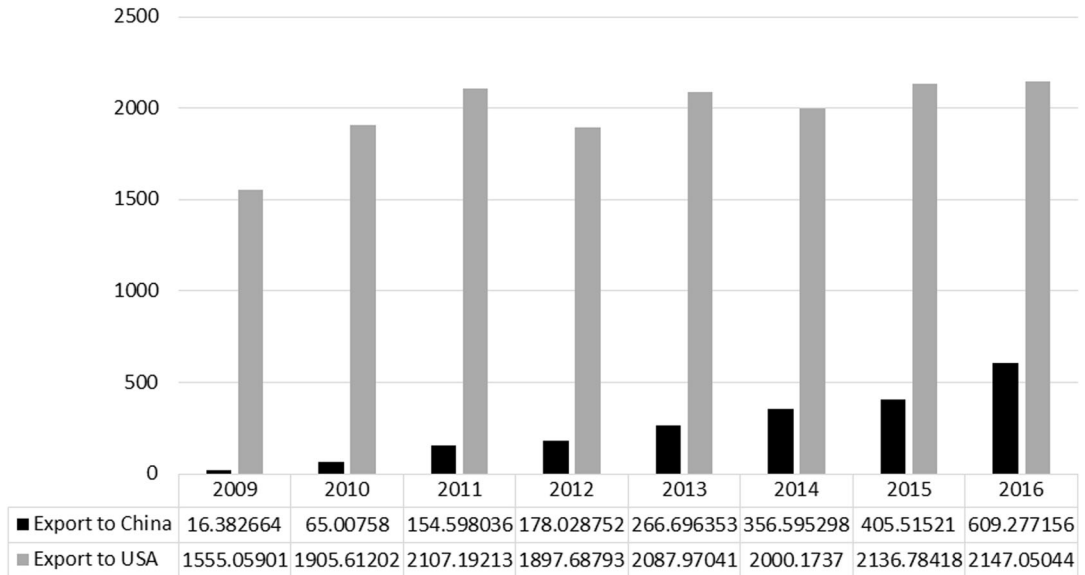
This article is a comparative case study in which an analysis of the policies of Cambodia and Vietnam toward China and the United States in political, economic, and military sectors will be made. The potential existence of strategic documents, defining cornerstones of foreign policies of both states, will be examined. The result will subsequently be confronted with my operational definition of hedging.

Any potential development of China’s relations with the United States will be understood as tools of the states such as Cambodia and Vietnam for balancing parts of their hedging strategies, that is, in a form of a hedge. It is important to emphasize, that relations with other powers, smaller states, or even international organizations can play a similar role. Nevertheless, their inclusion into the analysis would require a much broader study and it would disrupt the original conception as well. Therefore, this article will emphasize bilateral or trilateral relations between the researched actors (Cambodia/Vietnam) and target and hedge states (China/United States). By doing so, I have no intention to dispute the role of the multilateral level on relations dynamic, nevertheless, such strict limits will enable me to conduct deeper research and they will partly serve as a control mechanism of the causal influence of control variables.

My article is (besides the Introduction and Conclusion) divided into two basic parts. First, I will introduce the concept of hedging in a way it is understood by researchers like Evelyn Goh, Cheng-Chwee Kuik, or Kei Koga. This part is dedicated to the debate about the usage of hedging as an umbrella term for strategies of Southeast Asian countries; the criticism of this



TABLE 7 Export from Cambodia in million USD



Source: Author. Data: World Bank.

broad application made by Daren Lim, Zach Cooper, or Jürgen Haacke will also be mentioned. In the second part, I use my operational definition to assess the strategies of Cambodia and Vietnam toward US–China power rivalry. The resulting picture will show four dyadic relations (Cambodia–China, Cambodia–United States, Vietnam–China, Vietnam–United States), that will help me demonstrate the complexity and dynamics of the applied strategies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hedging remains an ambiguous term. Many existing interpretations agree hedging is a deliberate, purposeful, and simultaneous application of different attitudes toward foreign policy. Nevertheless, disagreements remain. They are related not only to concrete definitions, but also to a conceptual looseness of hedging, levels of analysis, conditions of application, or incentives prompting the actor to use it (comp. Goh, 2006; Haacke, 2019; Koga, 2018; Lim & Cooper, 2015). However, as Koga emphasized, without further clarification and theoretical anchorage, hedging lacks sufficient qualities for analytical usage (2018: 634). He then introduced three basic analytical advantages, that the elaboration would bring:

- (1) It would create a firmer base for hedging as the so-called “third strategy”—a choice between balancing and bandwagoning. That would enable researchers to explain the range of behavior possibilities of secondary states and enrich the realist theory of balance of power as a result.
- (2) It would contribute to a successful identification of geographical areas, where the increased power rivalry undergoes—hedging is often a reaction of weaker states (in terms of power) to the pressure from great powers, pushing them to clearly express their alignment choices.



TABLE 8 Cambodia: Hedging—Dual-track policy and middle position (table made by author)

Hedging		Existence of an official strategy or other document implying hedging		Yes ^a	
Sector	Tools	Profit maximization		Security maximization	
		Target state (China)	Hedge (United States)	Engagement	Balancing
Political	International treaties of amity and cooperation with a target state	Yes	? ^b	Yes	Strengthening of amicable relations with other countries through international treaties (with hedge state mainly)
	Initiation/participation in inter. organizations with a target state	Yes	No	Yes	Summits and establishing of inter. organizations with exclusive membership (without target state, with hedge state)
	Head of the state/government/member of government visits + mutual summits	Yes	Yes	Yes	Head of the state/government/member of government visits + mutual summits
Economic	Liberalization of mutual trade through signing of international treaties	Yes	Yes	Yes	Liberalization of trade with a hedge state and other actors
	Creation of cooperative international economic organizations or expert bodies with a target state	Yes	No ^c	Yes	Creation of cooperative international economic organizations or expert bodies with exclusive membership (without target state, but with hedge state)
	The volume of mutual trade + its direct (increase of export and import) with a target state	Yes	Yes	Yes	The volume of mutual trade + its direct (increase of export and import) with a hedge state
	Increase of FDI	Yes	Yes	Yes	Increase of FDI
	Foreign aid	Yes	Yes	Yes	Foreign aid

(Continues)



TABLE 8 (Continued)

Military	Treaties on military cooperation and consultations	Yes	Yes	Treaties on military cooperation and consultations
	Initiation/participation in military drills with the exclusion of a hedge state	Yes	Yes	Initiation/participation in military drills with exclusion of a target state
	Official visits and meetings of ministers of defense and chiefs of staff (or their equivalents)	Yes	Yes	Official visits and meetings of ministers of defense and chiefs of staff (or their equivalents)
	Acquisitions and donations of military hardware + training programs	Yes	Yes ^d	Acquisitions and donations of military hardware + training programs
			Yes ^e	Increasing of internal military capacity through military budget increase and acquisitions of military hardware
			No	Positioning against power and military activities of a target state
	Direction to bandwagoning			Direction to balancing

^aThe country pointed to references in its constitutional documents or very broadly defined goals of its foreign policy.

^bRelations were changing based on an internal political situation in Cambodia. Nevertheless, the United States emphasized engagement.

^cInteractions were made through different negotiation formats within ASEAN, that is, rather on a multilateral level.

^dCooperation was focused on donations of military hardware and nonlethal weapons.

^eCambodia was increasing its military capacity through purchases from China. Could this be considered as a balancing behavior?



An area with a higher presence of hedging actors would give evidence of power instability and power rivalry.

- (3) It would help policymakers better articulate the dynamics of international security, as it would prevent an incorrect classification of strategies of some small states as hedging and their subsequent increased exposure to the above-mentioned pressure from great powers (Koga, 2018: 634–635).

Goh's study of hedging focuses on the attitude of Southeast Asian states to regional security after the end of bipolar confrontation. According to her, that situation cannot be characterized by the existing methodology of the theory of international relations and in the end, it leads to discussions, whether it could be described rather by the realist concept of balancing or by liberal institutionalism (Goh, 2014, 2007: 114). She argued that the countries in the region do not wish to make unequivocal decisions about alignment either with the United States or with China. Rather, they try to influence the creation of a new regional order by the usage of tactical and time-buying policies (Goh, 2005). To achieve those goals, they use hedging as a contradictory policy consisting of two different components. That has become a shared pattern of behavior for most actors in the region (Goh, 2016).

As the first component of the strategy, Goh mentioned omni-enmeshment, which she defines as *“the process of engaging with a state so as to draw it into deep involvement into international or regional society, enveloping it into a web of sustained exchanges and relationships, with a long-term aim of integration”* (Goh, 2007: 121). The second component is then defined as balancing, which is not just about hedging the bets, but rather a complex strategy, leading to a long-term goal of creating a preferable form of the regional order (Goh, 2007: 131–132). Goh, therefore, defined hedging as *“a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning or neutrality. Instead, they cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side (or one straightforward policy stance) at the obvious expense of another”* (Goh, 2006).

Kuik defined hedging similarly when he stated that it is one of the forms of alignment behavior that differs from others by its ambiguity and mutually counteracting measures. This reflect both the acceptance of the power position of the target state in a form of, for example, a partnership in particular sectors and the denial of power politics of the country in a form of selective resistance and defiance (2016: 500). An alternative comprised of direct balancing offers a maximization of the security domain, but it requires a renunciation of commerce and diplomatic advantages at the same time. Such behavior is then considered to be *“military counter-productive, economically unwise, politically provocative and strategically hasty”* (2016: 513). Kuik, therefore, defines hedging as a strategy comprising of many components that lie in the middle of a spectrum, which is delimited by a pure form of balancing on one side and a pure form of bandwagoning on the other. The concrete position of a state on this scale is then defined by acceptance or denial of the power status of the great power the small state hedges its bets against (2008: 165).

Understanding hedging as an alternative to balancing and bandwagoning is typical for Koga as well. He mentioned that the concept can be seen as a combination of both mentioned strategies when a hedger strives for a mutual canceling out of their negative aspects. In the case of balancing, a double risk exists—when it comes to internal balancing, there is a risk of wrong distribution of inner sources that can potentially lead to destabilization of domestic social infrastructure; when it comes to external balancing, the author mentions the risk of entrapment



or abandonment.¹ The choice of bandwagoning is then identified with a chance of loss of autonomy based on a stronger state's political dominance. From Koga's point of view, hedging offered either a chance of postponing of a final decision, whether the state should apply balancing or bandwagoning, to the time the strategic constellation is clearer; or the choice of a neutral position aiming to maximize its autonomy (2018: 637-639).

For Lim and Cooper, hedging is rather a label that is unsuitable for studying different variations of the behavior of practicing states—thus it cannot be understood as “*a substantive analytical concept with theoretical variation, falsifiable predictions, and concrete conceptualization and measurement*” (2015: 702). Based on that, they argued that only a few Asian states truly practice hedging. As one of the main problematic aspects they mention the existence of territorial disputes with China; because by demonstrating their resolution to defend their territorial claims, states like Vietnam or the Philippines practically defy Chinese intentions, which leads to their alignment with the United States (2016).

This takes me to the second problematic aspect of hedging, which is application. The idea of hedging as a dominant or exclusive strategy of Southeast Asian states is not shared unequivocally among researchers, while (as Haacke pointed out) the differences in understanding which state hedges and which does not grow (2019: 386). Jae Ho Chung, for instance, claimed that the states in the region choose hedging as “*faux de mieux*,” that is, only because of the absence of any better alternative. The weight, that is given to the choice of balancing or bandwagoning differs substantially. He mentions Myanmar, North Korea, Cambodia, and Laos as states that can be added to the bandwagoning part of the reaction spectrum. As the main reason for that, he mentioned the fact, they express little or even nonconcerns about China's power rise (2009/2010: 660–662).

Var even described the strategy of Cambodia as bandwagoning China for benefit, which is in line with its interests of strengthening security and political stability, economic development, and preservation of sovereignty (Var, 2017). Sovinda Po and Christopher Primiano supported this thesis, when they argued that because of the absence of territorial disputes Cambodia, unlike other states of the region, does not feel any acute threat. Thus it rather prioritizes economic development—an area China is of assistance. That is why the Cambodian authoritative regime “*has decided to not follow the direction of other Asian states in hedging, that is, engaging China for economic gains and engaging the United States for security reassurances*” (2020: 445).

Very similarly, Jae Ho Chung defined Vietnam as the “*hesitant hedger*”, as Hanoi expresses some strategic concerns about China's power rise. Nevertheless, it has not adopted the balancing strategy fully and it restrains itself from seeking close relations with external powers in a military sphere (2009/2010: 667). On the other hand, Kuik disagreed with this, and he goes as far as he describes Vietnam together with the Philippines as ASEAN states that deepened the security cooperation with pivoting America in the fastest way, especially in form of an effort to gain strategic capital to increase capabilities of its military forces (2016: 12). White then specified that there exists enduring support of the American dominant stance within the region, which emanates from concerns over the potential hegemony of China. Nevertheless, countries usually show a significant economic dependence on Beijing, and they strive for political alignment with it at the same time. Hedging is then understood as an attempt to explain these contradictory ambitions. However, the problem remains in the fact that this term has not been specified (2016). By the way, Goh agreed with that point, when she argues, that if hedging is about to become an analytically useful concept, it must be properly defined in a way it could be “*distinguished*



from balancing, containment, bandwagoning, buck-passing, and other more straightforward strategic choices” (2006).

A NEW DEFINITION OF HEDGING

My operational definition is based from an understanding hedging as an alternative strategy situated in the center of the scale between more straightforward strategic poles of balancing and bandwagoning, like it is presented, for instance, by Koga (2018) or Haacke (2019). In my work, I stuck with the concept presented by Randall L. Schweller. He defines balancing as an act, aimed at self-preservation and the protection of possessed values—it is based on a wish to avoid losses. On the contrary, bandwagoning is focused on gaining something the actor desires—it is driven by an opportunity to gain (1994: 74). This specification is very important for my definition because the hedger is understood as an active actor that chooses his strategy deliberately and freely based on his aims, interests, and values; not only as a passive object forced to adopt the strategic choice by others.

Similarly to Kuik (2008, 2016), I argue that hedging is an approach based on two sets of policies. As the first part of my concept of hedging, I identify engagement, which I plan to conceive in a way Resnick did. He proposed to “define engagement as the attempt to influence the political behavior of the target state through the comprehensive establishment and enhancement of contacts with that state across multiple issue-areas” (2001: 559). These are then divided into four groups—diplomatic, military, economic, cultural. Engagement is then a process when the engager and a target state develop relations of increasing interdependence that lead to fully normalized relations. These are characterized by a high degree of mutual interactions in different areas, from which the target state gains material resources and some prestige in the international arena, while the engager tries to modify the behavior of the target state and its foreign policy (2001: 559–560).

The second set of policies is made of indirect balancing. As Hlaváček writes, it is “manifested in a way, when the hedger strengthens its military and diplomatic capabilities, that are not targeted at any concrete country. Balancing can be applied either internally, for instance by increasing the military budget, or externally, or rather in bilateral or multilateral cooperation with other states that share the same interests, by increased activity in regional organizations, where the shared concerns can be articulated” (2016: 58).² The reason why I chose indirect balancing instead of its direct form is that the indirect form resonates much more with a characteristic of hedging as a strategy within which the hedger refuses to choose any of the straightforward strategies. Because in the case of indirect balancing, the actor does not explicitly target any state as a threat (even though that reality can be well-known within the foreign policy context). On the contrary, the direct balancing contains this explicit identification, which leads to the usage of different policies by the balancer. Such an approach then relates to the stand-alone straightforward strategy that creates one of the extreme positions of the reaction spectrum of bandwagoning-balancing. Hedging, comprising of engagement and indirect balancing, is then understood as an approach situated between those two extreme poles.

From Resnick (2001), I took his division of engagement elements into three thematic sectors—diplomatic/political, military, and economic. However, I decided to eliminate his cultural sector as redundant, because many key aspects of that sector were included in the previous three ones. The very balancing is then possible to be observed in all three thematic



sectors, even though the majority of texts about hedging imply otherwise. Based on their argumentation, engagement is found mainly in economic or political sectors, while these policies are secured by balancing in military sphere with acts of building balancing alliances (see Koga, 2018). However, I conceive such understanding as too simplistic. I presume that within hedging strategy, there is no sphere, where just one element would show stronger than in other ones—meaning, there is no need to create firm associations between a sector and a concrete set of strategies. This choice of sectors relevant for hedging is then confirmed by Koga. He stressed the fact, that material capabilities (manifested in military and economic spheres) are the most important variable, nevertheless, the diplomatic part is crucial for a good understanding of all the nuances of hedging (2018: 640–641).

This new original definition of hedging defines it as:

A specific strategy followed by an actor of the international system that seeks to hedge itself against a negative development in mutual relations with other (target) actors without excluding a chance of a positive variant. This strategy is applied in an environment characterized by a high degree of uncertainty about the future intentions of the target actor (very often in times of change of polarity of regional or global order). In such an uncertain situation, the application of one straightforward strategy is considered too risky. Therefore, the hedging actor (so-called hedger) chooses a policy that is a combination of efforts to maximize its security and to maximize utility (or profit). Both attitudes are applied intentionally and simultaneously and the result is a dual-track policy consisting of two basic sets of political tools. The first could be identified as engagement. It serves as a way how the hedger can change the behavior of the target actor by influencing its system of preferences. It does so by deepening the quality and quantity of mutual interactions and by establishing new relations of interdependence. The second set could be identified as indirect balancing that the hedger uses for strengthening its power position. It does so not even on an internal level by increasing its capabilities but also on an external level by establishing new ties with other actors that share similar interests and values or rather express their concerns about the intentions of the target actor. Both sets of hedging can be observed in political, economic, and military spheres, where hedger uses tools on bilateral and multilateral levels (in case of balancing even on unilateral level). The hedger also uses this strategy to push forward its preferred idea of a power structure in its region or the international system as well. It also expresses a certain ambiguity of its foreign policy affiliation, at least until a choice of any more straightforward strategies is seen as more advantageous.

To overcome the criticism that hedging lacked the proper conceptualization and a set of falsifiable predictions, I propose the process of detecting hedging consisting of a few basic steps. It has general validity and can serve policymakers and researchers as a clear analytical tool for detecting hedging behavior:

First, I need to find out, whether a country has a clearly defined strategy that it is committed to following. It is also important, whether the change in the distribution of power on regional or global levels, that is, the power struggle between great powers, is reflected by that strategy. And also, whether the strategy suggests (as the most suitable solution to solve that situation) the application of policies that would oppose an unequivocal alignment to one of the power poles at the expense of the other, or those, that would express concerns about a significant dominance of one of the poles and a subsequent need to accept its power preponderance. The existence of such strategic conception can be understood as one of the indicators of potential adoption of hedging as a foreign policy strategy of the state, without a



need to be openly or specifically named. Ascertainment of that fact would then offer the understanding of broader context, the policies in relevant sectors could be fitted in and further interpreted. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize, that the mere existence of the foreign policy strategy in the written form of the above-mentioned character is not a sufficient indicator of hedging. Much more important is the empirical application of aspects of hedging in political practice, where the intention coming from the highest echelons of power/political leadership of the country can be detected—from the strategic point of view, it cannot be applied haphazardly, although its anchorage in the official foreign policy documents is not necessary.

Second, I focus on concrete observed variables. I propose to divide them into three basic sectors in both spheres of engagement and balancing—political, economic, and military. Then I will observe, what are their mutual relations—whether they are complementary or contradictory, and how they correspond with the overall context of declared foreign policy strategy. By defining them, I react to a reproach made by Jürgen Haacke, who points out that “*the literature on hedging has to date largely evaded debating what indicators we should employ to ascertain hedging*” (2019: 392). I offer their full list in the table below. I also stress out, that the crucial proof will not be seen in the mere existence of the policies, but rather in their concord with my operational definition of hedging.

EMPIRICAL DISCUSSION

I apply my operational definition together with a defined set of variables on examples of Vietnam and Cambodia.

VIETNAM

Political sector

Hanoi thrived to establish a basic foreign policy framework focused on leaving the one-sided, mainly ideologically driven direction of its foreign relations, and focusing on the elements of multilateralization and diversification instead. The intention of the newly adopted approach expressed Vietnam's strategical interests of increasing its power stance and preserving its sovereignty in the rapidly changing regional order, affected by the US–China power rivalry. It was also about to take into consideration Hanoi's problematic historical experience with both great powers and capitalize as much as possible on their “charm offensive,” which was focused on gaining the support of the smaller states in the region. All that without a need to establish overdependence on one of the power poles.

That is why Vietnam was able to re-establish and further develop political cooperation with Washington, even though the mutual relations were still partly overshadowed by the war for reunification in the 1960s and 1970s. The ideological differences also played a role and decelerated the process. Nevertheless, the rising power of neighboring China and a need to balance it with the might of the other great power (with a lesser ambition to establish its sphere



of influence over Vietnam) pushed Hanoi to give preference to the practical aspects of national interests over ideological affiliation. Regarding China, in the political point of view, Vietnam proceeded from historical experience, when it was an essential part of the Chinese sphere of influence. Its goal was to forestall a repetition of the situation. But it was concerned about the ignition of hostilities, resembling the strained relations after a devastating conflict of 1979, that led to the international isolation of the country by Beijing, at the same time. As Tran mentioned, China's rise was considered a significant challenge for Hanoi (Tran, 2016: 89). The adoption of a delicate policy, combining the development of amicable relations with Beijing on one hand and the control of Chinese power expansion with the help of the US political influence on the other was, therefore, needed.

When we apply my two-step analytical scheme, we can say that for a definition of Vietnam's relations to other actors, the documents related to the *doi moi* reforms and adopted by the Communist Party of Vietnam (VCP) were crucial. The first one was Resolution No. 13 “*On the Task and Foreign Policy in the New Situation*” formulated in May 1988. It called for the application of omnidirectional foreign policy, aimed at the creation of brand-new amity relations. It resulted in the establishment of relations not only with ASEAN states, but also with Japan, or the United States (Grossman, 2020: 8). The second was Resolution No. 8, Section IX, adopted in 2003 as part of the strategy “*On Defense of the Homeland in the New Situation.*” Pavel Hlaváček understands it as one of the milestones in the development of Vietnamese foreign policy after the end of the Cold War, while he emphasizes, that its key importance lies in setting the criteria for telling allies (*doi tac*) from foes (*doi tuong*). The main one was not the ideological affinity anymore. Instead, the concord with Vietnamese national interests was adopted. The inner political arrangement of the country was not seen as an obstacle anymore and any actor could find itself in both categories simultaneously (Hlaváček, 2015: 55–56, 59). The result was diversification and multilateralization of Vietnam's foreign policy, which was newly focused on blending of interests of great powers in a way Vietnam could eschew increased dependence on only one of them or other threats to its sovereignty and independence (Tran, 2016: 88–89). To put it into a nutshell, it was a way of facing the dilemma of Vietnam and other regional countries “*in keeping themselves safe from the elephant fight and maintaining a balance between two great powers*” (Le, 2020: 22).³

From the standpoint of a codification of quality of relations with observed great powers, the strategic partnership agreements (*doi tac chien luoc*) seemed to be crucial. According to Parameswaran, this term refers to “*a loose, structured and multifaceted framework of cooperation between two parties*” (2014: 263). China occupied a special position within that system of agreements when it was labeled as one side of the *comprehensive strategic partnership* in 2008. Therefore, it stood on the highest level of relations, where it was treated as an allied socialistic country with close military and economic cooperation, notwithstanding continuous territorial disputes. However, the US did not stand aside, as Hanoi clinched the *comprehensive partnership* with Washington in 2013. It represented a lower level of relations, even though the military cooperation deepened significantly (Harold et al., 2019: 255–256). The reason for choosing that category by Vietnam can probably be seen in actual assessment of bilateral cooperation in the context of relations with other states and also persisting differences in views on human rights, together with concerns of conservative communist circles about alignment with a former enemy (Parameswaran, 2014: 266).⁴

The highest level was represented by official summits of the heads of states. In July 2013, for instance, the Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang traveled to the White House, where he together with Barack Obama signed the above-mentioned comprehensive partnership



agreement. Obama expressed the United States support of independence, sovereignty, and prosperity of Vietnam and Truong acknowledged the continuous engagement of the United States in Asia-Pacific that, from his point of view, contributed to the stability and peace in the region (White House, 2013). That meeting was followed by an official visit of President Obama to Vietnam in May 2016, which demonstrated a deepening of relations based on American engagement. On the subsequent press conference he explained: “*It’s taken many years and required great effort. But now we can say something that was once unimaginable: Today, Vietnam and the United States are partners*” (Obama, 2016). Therefore, Hlaváček concluded, that “*the current communication with the White House reaches the highest level the American-Vietnamese relations have experienced since the proclamation of independent Vietnam in 1945*” (2015: 59). Nguyen then agreed to this when he wrote that “*(R)elations between Vietnam and the United States had improved remarkably under the Obama administration*” (2018: 416).

One of the tools of Vietnamese strategy toward China in the observed period were the meetings at the top level, based on three major channels:

- government-to-government
- party-to-party
- people-to-people (Le, 2013: 346).

Key was the establishment of the *Joint Steering Committee on Bilateral Cooperation* in 2006, which was about to run on a model of meetings of deputy prime ministers with a goal to coordinate mutual activities. As a result, the “hotline” for resolving urgent matters was created in March 2009 (Thayer, 2011: 351). A special category comprised of meetings of high officials of communist parties, that involved not only leaders but also members of central committees. The aim was to identify areas of shared interests (Grossman, 2020: 19; Thayer, 2011: 351). For instance, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong visited China in 2011, where he met his Chinese counterpart, Hu Jintao. The talks resulted in the signing of six agreements adjusting bilateral relations. The most important one was probably the *Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Sea Issues between Vietnam and China* that declared an obligation to resolve demarcation disputes in the Gulf of Tonkin and deepen cooperation in fields of oil and gas exploration and extraction (Hao & Quinghong, 2016: 232). Since the normalization of mutual relations in 1991, there have been 36 meetings of high state and party officials held (Le, 2013: 346).

Economic sector

It is important to emphasize the fact, that VCP understood the economic sector as an important part of national security—development and security were not seen as standing apart, but rather dialectically, when a successful development policy was about to increase the overall power of the country and by doing so strengthen its capability to protect sovereignty (Tran, 2016: 87–88). That is why Hanoi did not tie its activities solely on the Chinese thriving economic model, however tempting that option seemed to be, and rather diversified its portfolio by increased cooperation with the United States. The balancing role of Washington was important mainly in the sector of foreign direct investment that brought not only capital but also badly needed innovation.

The United States was one of Vietnam’s most important trading partners. As Tran emphasized, the trade surplus, Hanoi had with the United States, helped to compensate for the



trade deficit with China. Vietnamese economic model based on cheap exports resembled significantly the Chinese one, which led to strong competition for Vietnamese products, as they entered the Chinese market. However, that economic structure fitted into the American model, where the Vietnamese products were in high demand for their low prices and high quality (2016: 95). Similarly, the significant deepening of economic relations with China became crucial for Vietnam. It helped it not only to create conditions for its economic development but by the expansion of its material base to increase its security posture, as well. The economic sphere also offered Vietnam an opportunity to thicken a web of contacts with China and by doing so made any coercive action of Beijing toward Hanoi more complicated (Le, 2013: 343–346).

Referring to the US–Vietnam relations, the mutual trade increased between 2009 and 2017. The main beneficiary was the Vietnamese export that reached 11,415 billion USD in 2009 and increased to 38,473 billion USD in the last full year of Obama's presidency (in 2016). The United States was playing the role of the most important trading partner of Vietnam during that period (World Bank). Due to that, the trade deficit, the United States had with Vietnam, was increasing considerably from 9190 billion USD (2009) to 31,987 billion USD in 2016⁵ (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Vietnam was a magnet for American investment—in 2009 the total volume of American FDI to Vietnam reached 738 million USD, but it increased to 1956 billion USD in 2016 (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2020). Based on the USAID data, the foreign aid dedicated to Vietnam was also growing—from 103,805 million USD in 2009 to 157,432 million USD in 2016. Economic help constituted the biggest part (USAID).

Since the normalization of relations in 1991, the mutual trade with China also expanded rapidly—it reached 35.7 billion USD in 2011, which meant an 1100 time increase from figures in 1991 (Le, 2013: 345). Vietnamese export was 5402 billion USD in 2009, but it increased to 21,950 billion USD in 2016, which made China the second biggest export market for Vietnam (after the United States). However, Vietnam rather played a role of a selling market for Chinese exports, when China occupied the position of the biggest importer—Chinese export was 16,673 billion USD in 2009 (comp. with American 3019 billion USD), but it climbed to 50,037 billion USD in 2016 (comp. with American 8712 billion USD) (World Bank, 2020). Export from Vietnam comprised mainly of raw materials, unprocessed commodities, and industrial products with low added value, while the import from China consisted of industrial products, components, and products with high added value like pharmaceuticals, computers, or electronics (Tran, 2016: 91). Similarly, the increased influx of Chinese FDI into Vietnam was recorded. The overall number of Chinese capital flow reached 700 million USD in 2011, nevertheless, it jumped to 2.4 billion USD in 2018. Therefore, China climbed from the 14th to 5th place on the list of the biggest investors in Vietnam (Lam, 2019: 2).

Referring to foreign aid, the White Paper of 2011 states that 32.8% of the overall financial volume streamed into 30 Asian countries in 2009 (State Council, The People's Republic of China, 2011). The same document of 2014 then mentions China donated 110 million USD to the Asia Development Fund established by the Asian Development Bank until 2012 (State Council, The People's Republic of China, 2014).

Vietnam also joined the BRI project initiated by China in 2013. It was intended to include 65 countries with 4.4 billion inhabitants and 29% of the world's GDP (Menon, 2017). Hanoi understood it mainly as a source of investment into its transport infrastructure (including railways, highways, and maritime ports), which it was unable to build according to plans (Le, 2018: 2–3).



Military sector

Vietnamese activities in the military sector strongly correlated with its political goals. They fitted into the above-mentioned framework aimed at preserving independence and sovereignty by developing and strengthening its domestic military capabilities. Those measures were as crucial in the environment of rapidly evolving United States–China power competition. That was watched in Hanoi with concerns about the potential of increasing instability and strong pressure on Vietnam for the adoption of clear allegiance policies by both great powers, which could destroy Vietnamese strategical concepts (see further), limit its maneuvering space, and expose it to the danger of entrapment or abandonment. That is why Denmark concluded that *“Hanoi does not seek formal alliances and will never put itself in a position to be dominated, dictated to, or dependent upon a foreign power—no matter how much their geopolitical interests may converge. Rather, as a cold geopolitical calculation, Vietnam’s leaders seek to engage the United States in order to balance against potential Chinese aggression”* (2020: 221–222).

Therefore, both the United States and China constituted important partners, however, their roles in the strategic thinking of Vietnam were mutually opposite (Le, 2020: 24). Here I should mention the Three No’s Policy, firstly unveiled in the White Paper on defense in 1998, which comprised of three prohibitions: no formal military alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnam’s soil, and no military activities aimed against any third country. According to Grossman, this policy made *“one of the major obstacles to deepening substantive cooperation—particularly in defense domain”* (2020: 10). Vietnam expressed concerns about China’s rising military capabilities and its willingness to use them to press its interests, regularly. It was also seen as one of the main reasons why Hanoi deepened cooperation with the United States to maintain American military presence in the region, which was understood as a way of strengthening its security (Selden, 2013: 339). Pavel Hlaváček then underlines that *“Vietnam’s main interest is not the alliance with the U.S. against China, but rather to use the help of the U.S. (and other countries) to defend itself from attempts of China to reach hegemony. There is more than just a semantical difference in this statement. Vietnam has a vital interest in the U.S. remaining active in the region, but it shares the interest in keeping above-standard relations with China, as well”* (2015: 60–61).

The milestone in United States–Vietnam military relations occurred in 2011 when both sides signed a memorandum of understanding, including a pledge to share information on noncombat operations of their armies (Harold et al., 2019: 282; Grossman, 2020: 37). In 2015 the United States included Vietnam in its *Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative* (MSI), aimed at providing 425 million USD for the development of maritime capabilities to the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam (Le, 2020: 25). A breakthrough was achieved in July 2015, when General Secretary Nguyen Phu Truong visited the White House and together with Obama signed the *Joint Vision Statement*. Its essential part was a program of American help aimed at the development of Vietnam’s capabilities in the field of maritime domain awareness (Harold et al., 2019: 282). The document also indirectly condemned Chinese maritime activities when it stated that *“both countries are concerned about recent developments in the South China Sea that have increased tension, eroded trust, and threatened ton to undermine peace, security, and stability”* (White House, 2015).

Any potential transfers of weaponry to Vietnam were under restrictions, following the American embargo on the sale of lethal weapons. Nevertheless, it was partly lifted in 2014, dispensations included maritime security systems, mainly. The embargo was then fully lifted in 2016 (Mehta, 2016). Based on that, the Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) initiated the purchase of



six patrol boats Metal Shark 75, when the United States provided Hanoi with an 18 million USD loan (Gady, 2016). Subsequently, the sale of a retiring US Coast Guard cutter was initiated. The project was part of the US State Department program *Foreign Military Financing* that provided Vietnam with military aid overreaching 56 million USD in the budget period 2013–2018 (U.S. State Department, 2019). Both countries also launch cooperation on the level of military delegations, when the Vietnamese observers participated in RIMPAC, which represents the biggest international navy drill in the world (Parameswaran, 2018; U.S. State Department, 2019). As Le Hong Hiep emphasizes: “*On the one hand, Vietnam is trying to take advantage of US assistance to strengthen its maritime capacity and to improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea. On the other hand, Vietnam is trying not to create the perception that Vietnam is siding with the US, especially militarily*” (2020: 28).

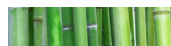
In 2010, ministries of defense of both countries established the strategic defense dialog, that laid the foundation for regular meetings (Le, 2013: 349). What is more, regular military exercises were held between both countries. As an example, the *Vietnam–China Border Defense Friendship Exchange Program* can be mentioned. It is comprised of mutual maneuvers in border regions, including many nonmilitary activities (Nhan, 2018). The *Thien Than* drills in Ha Giang province followed in 2016. They were presented as a tool for the creation of a framework for the cooperation of both armies in crisis management in border regions (Parameswaran, 2016).

Vietnam was increasing its military budget as well, its level floating between 2 and 2.5% of GDP (Le, 2013: 352). Based on estimates, Hanoi spent 3126 billion USD (2.3% GDP) in 2009, then 3485 billion (2.3% GDP) 1 year later, while the expenditures decreased slightly in 2011 to 3253 billion USD (2% GDP) (SIPRI—Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020b, 2020c).⁶ Data for subsequent years are not available in the SIPRI database, nevertheless, those resources assisted Vietnam in strengthening its deterrence capacities by realizing the purchases of military hardware from abroad. Those reached 5322 billion USD in 2009–2016—with main supplies coming from Russia (4781 billion USD), Belarus (150 million USD), Israel (132 million USD), and Ukraine (120 million USD) (SIPRI—Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020a).

CAMBODIA

Political sector

Cambodia's actions in a political sector reflected its geopolitical stance on two levels. Apart from the broader regional setting of ongoing United States–China rivalry, Cambodia's strategical response had to incorporate its problematic relations with neighbors. It was focused not only on profiting from the great power competition, but it was about to use that rivalry as a warranty of its sovereignty and position in the regional order. For the country is situated between two more powerful neighbors and former foes (Thailand and Vietnam) on one side and regional power (China) on the other. Especially in the case of Vietnam, the perception of it as an existential threat persisted due to continued territorial disputes. The alignment with China was seen as a result of strategic calculation aimed at gaining security guarantees serving the purpose of a hedge against Vietnam and leading to strengthening of own military capabilities. At the same time, there was a risk of loss of trust of the international community and a further undermining of Cambodia's position within ASEAN, in case Beijing was given



any special access (Heng, 2012: 77; Po & Primiano, 2020: 449, 454–456). Cambodia's geographical position also made it an essential part of the Chinese “String of Pearls” strategy—an effort to expand its influence through the region by control of important air and maritime transport hotspots with military and economic potential. The Sihanoukville port, therefore, became a target of Chinese investment, as it assisted Beijing in projecting its power further into the Gulf of Thailand and the Strait of Malacca (Heng, 2012: 73–74).

When we look at the official framework, Cambodia's foreign-policy strategy was based on six basic principles, that were mentioned in Article 53 of its Constitution and included: (1) perpetual and strict neutrality and non-alignment, (2) peaceful coexistence with neighbors, (3) solving problems in a peaceful way and noninterference into internal affairs of other countries, (4) prohibition of military alliances and pacts, (5) prohibition of foreign military bases on Cambodia's territory, and (6) reserving rights to accept foreign military assistance and to conduct drills focused on self-defense. An inability to live up to those principles was seen as a step toward chaos and conflict (Sarith, 2014).

Relations between Washington and Phnom Penh were hit by the differences regarding the domestic policy situation in Cambodia. The United States criticized the deteriorating state of democracy in the kingdom in the long term, together with government interventions against political opposition. Nevertheless, the impact of those appeals was minimal, even President Obama's visit to Phnom Penh in 2012 could not make any meaningful change. Notwithstanding, Obama hesitated to introduce any significantly harder approach, probably out of fear of deepening further Cambodia–China alignment (Hutt, 2016). Repressions increased especially after successful opposition campaigns in the 2013 and 2017 elections, which resulted in a ban of the strongest opposition formation *Cambodia National Rescue Party* (CNRP) in the same year. Those measures stood opposite to the engagement efforts of the US government that were focused on strengthening democratic institutions, norms, and the rule of law (Congressional Research Service, 2019: Summary).

The activities of *Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia* (ECCC), the international judiciary tribunal for the crimes of the Khmer Rouge era, were also important. The court started its work in 2006, while the United States withdrew its contribution payment between 2006 and 2008 because of concerns about the independence of trials. The financing was renewed after that, but there were strict conditions attached, aimed at preventing corruption and influencing by the government. For instance, the US financial contribution reached 5 million USD in 2010 (Congressional Research Service, 2019: 8–9; U.S. Embassy in Cambodia, 2010: 64).

The close relations between China and Cambodia were regularly bolstered by meeting on the highest level. For example, Prime Minister Hun Sen visited China in April 2013, when both sides agreed to the foundation of an intergovernmental coordination committee, that was about to secure the conditions for the *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Cooperation*, leading to better coordination of mutual activities (Global Times, 2013). Cambodia also played the role of one of the strongest advocates of the one-China policy within ASEAN, when it deported 20 Uighur asylum seekers on request of Beijing in 2009. That act led to further deterioration of relations with Washington. On the other hand, China shielded Phnom Penh in 2017, when Hun Sen's government faced the pressure of the United States and European Union because of persecution of CNRP leaders and subsequent dissolution of the party (Vannarith & Heng, 2019: 8–9).

Even though this article is focused on bilateral relations, it cannot miss the event of July 2012, when the foreign ministers of ASEAN countries failed (for the first time in 45 years of its



existence) to release a common communiqué after the *ASEAN Ministerial Meeting* (AMM) negotiation held in Phnom Penh. The reason was Cambodia's blocking of Vietnam and the Philippines' request for mentioning the discussions about territorial disputes in the South China Sea, based on the argument, those were bilateral issues that did not fall into ASEAN competence (Bower, 2012). A similar reaction followed 4 years later when Cambodia blocked a common statement condemning Chinese activities in the South China Sea. Claiming allegiance to the one-China policy followed, demonstrated by a ban of displaying Taiwanese flags on Cambodian soil (Po & Primiano, 2020: 447). After all, the membership of Cambodia in ASEAN was considered a strong asset, that China was very interested in, to form other regional actors to serve its interests (Heng, 2012: 72). The Cambodian approach to that matter was then appreciated by President Xi Jinping during his visit to the country in October 2016. Article 9 of the *Joint statement between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the People's Republic of China* declared that “both sides are of the view that the South China Sea issue is not an issue between China and ASEAN. It should be resolved through consultation and negotiations by countries directly concerned” (Kingdom of Cambodia—Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2016).

Heng, therefore, concluded that “Cambodia is currently one of China's closest allies in Southeast Asia. The relationship between the two nations has reached a new peak with closer ties in almost all areas of cooperation” (2012: 67).

Financial sector

Cambodia's approach to United States–China rivalry was based on its desire to use it as an accelerator of its economic development. Both countries played a crucial role in their economic model (providing different incentives and services—see further) and a dominant orientation on only one of them at the expense of the other was not seen as strategically wise and desirable. After all, the Cambodian ministry of foreign affairs states, that in the frame of its foreign policy direction country strives for diversification of investment sources and expansion of export markets to reach its goal of becoming a higher middle-income country until 2030 and high-income country till 2050 (Kingdom of Cambodia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2021).

Bilateral economic relations between Cambodia and the United States were defined in the *Trade and Investment Framework Agreement* (TIFA) of 2014 that served as a base for negotiations about rules of trade, investment, customs, and banking. Obama's administration then lifted limitations of financing from the *US Export-Import Bank* for American companies doing business in Cambodia and it added an amendment to the mutual trade agreement, that enabled it to provide financial assistance to project aimed at meeting Cambodian economic priorities (Thayer, 2010: 451, 454). The mutual trade in goods category was represented by a higher Cambodian export to the United States that reached 1555 billion USD in 2009, while in the last full year of Obama's presidential tenure it climbed to 2147 billion USD. On the contrary, the import from the United States was 90,750 million USD in 2009 and it rose to 173,545 million USD in 2016. Washington had, therefore, been Cambodia's most important export market since 2010, even though its market share had been decreasing through the time—from 34.09% in 2010 to 21.32% in 2016 (World Bank). The American FDI to Cambodia experienced significant growth from 25 million USD in 2009 to 135 million USD in 2016. However, in comparison to China, they were incomparably lower (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2020). When it comes to

foreign aid, it reached 89,682 million USD in the year Obama entered the Oval Office, and then grew to 103,794 million USD in 2016 (USAID).

Relations with China played a crucial role in Cambodia's effort to fulfill its goal of the above-mentioned economic development. Beijing, unlike Washington, had little interest in noneconomic conditions of cooperation and by doing so helped Cambodia overcome disadvantages emanating from a low population level, low per capita income, low productivity, high corruption, and a poor state of governance, that would otherwise discredit it in the eyes of foreign investors (O'Neill, 2014: 179). Ciorciari then adds: "*Although Chinese investment is not string-free, the implicit conditions Beijing attaches are more consonant with the narrow economic and political interests of Cambodia's governing elite*" (2015: 253).

Those relations were considerably influenced by the launch of the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), which added strong momentum to the partnership and cleared the way for the increase of Cambodian material capacities and added further legitimacy to Hun Sen's regime (Vannarith & Heng, 2019: 11). The Cambodian export reached 16,383 million USD in 2009 and grew to 609,277 million USD in 2016. The Chinese market share, therefore, rose from 0.33% in 2009 to 6.05% in 2016. On the other hand, Chinese export to Cambodia rose rapidly—from 882,462 million USD (2009) to 4551 billion USD (2016). Based on that China represented the biggest import partner with a market share ranging from 22.59% (2009) to 36.79% (2016)⁷ (World Bank). The influx of FDI was regulated by the *Law on Investment*. From its enactment in 1994 up until 2019, the biggest share of cumulative FDI came from China with 21.81% (Council for the Development of Cambodia, 2020). Simply saying, Beijing played the role of the biggest investor between 2013 and 2017, which led to the influx of 5.3 billion USD. Those resources went mainly into manufacturing, construction, irrigation systems, telecommunication, and power engineering—there was evidence about the investment of 1.6 billion USD into six hydropower plants or 11.2 billion USD into a railway expansion and mining (Ciorciari, 2015, 253; Vannarith & Heng, 2019: 10).

Foreign aid played a significant role in both country's mutual relations, while its connection to business activities was very significant (Hutt, 2016). The meeting between Prime Minister Hun Sen with his Chinese counterpart on the sidelines of the 11th *Asia-Europe Meeting* (ASEM) in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia in July 2016 seemed to be crucial, as Li Keqiang promised to provide 600 million USD of foreign help to Cambodia in a period 2016-2018 for projects aimed at strengthening election infrastructure, education, and healthcare (Khemara, 2016). Although, the exact numbers are unknown, based on the estimates China represented not only the biggest source of FDI but also the most important source of foreign aid (O'Neill, 2014: 180).

Military sector

Cambodia's strategical response on a military level strongly corresponded with a political sector as the bilateral cooperation between the armed forces of Cambodia and the United States/China was influenced by the ups and downs in the political relations. That was mainly evident in the case of the United States and its criticism of Cambodia's domestic political situation and a state of democracy in the country.

Relations on the military level between Cambodia and the United States were restored in 2004, although Washington did not provide Phnom Penh with any foreign aid until 2007. Nevertheless, as early as September 2009 Cambodia's Defence Secretary Tea Banh visited Washington to meet his American counterpart, Robert Gates. That represented the meeting on



the highest level between representatives of the defense sectors of both states, so far. Leaders discussed the deepening of cooperation, that had had the form of providing nonlethal equipment to Cambodia or a short-term anchoring of American navy ships in Cambodian ports (Phann & Gillison, 2009; Thyer, 2020: 449). Between March and April 2009, Cambodian and United States navies conducted the first joint maneuvers ever, aimed at rescue operations. The significant milestone was reached when Cambodia joined the *Global Peace Operations Initiative* (GPOI), a global project of peacekeeping training financed by Washington (Thayer, 2010: 455). Since 2010, both navies cooperated within the framework of *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training* (CARAT) with participants of the 7th fleet. The main goal of the drills was to increase interoperability and strengthen regional security (U.S. Navy, 2016). However, continuing disputes regarding the domestic policy situation in Cambodia influenced the military cooperation as well. The Sen's government canceled the *Angkor Sentinel* drills in 2017 and postponed the *U.S. Navy Mobile Construction Battalion* mission indefinitely. That project was conducted together with *Royal Cambodian Armed Forces* (RCAF) and was focused on the development of local communities. It had realized projects worth more than 5 million USD since 2008 (Congressional Research Service, 2019: 7).

The cooperation in the military sector between Cambodia and China was comprised mainly of the development of Cambodian navy capacities through the donations of elderly Chinese boats. Beijing presented that program as a contribution to the fight against piracy and drug smuggling while reiterating the spill-over effect of those steps for increased security and stability in the region (Burgos & Ear, 2010: 620). Thus, China played the long-term role of the biggest donor and supplier of military hardware to Cambodia. That cooperation accelerated in 2013 with a purchase of 12 Z-9 fighting helicopters (bought with a loan from China worth 195 million USD) and continued with a donation of 26 vehicles in 2014. The infantry institute, the first of its kind in the region, then represented a hallmark project of cooperation (Parameswaran, 2015).

Cambodia gradually continued in increasing its military budget, after all, when it reached 185 million USD (1.3% GDP) in 2009 and hit 404 million USD (1.9% GDP) in 2016⁸ (SIPRI—Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020b, 2020c). Those resources enabled Phnom Penh to further modernize its military forces—based on the SIPRI database, Cambodia realized purchases worth 183 million USD between 2009 and 2016. The biggest suppliers included China (58 million USD), Ukraine (54 million USD), Serbia (30 million USD), and the Czech Republic (28 million USD) (SIPRI—Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020a).

CONCLUSION

This article can be understood as a contribution to the debate about reactions of small countries/secondary states to the great-power rivalry. Its main hypothesis centers on the concept of hedging could be used for explaining the foreign policy strategies of Southeast Asian countries to a power struggle between China and the United States. Nevertheless, such an idea had not been generally accepted in scientific circles—there were reproofs for the theoretical anchorage of the concept, pointing out the insufficiently rigorous elaboration in comparison with other concepts and the concrete examples of some countries' behavior that evoked a choice of other more straightforward strategies or at least the long-term inclination



toward them. That would prove that hedging, as a general strategy of Southeast Asian states, has time and functional limitations and cast doubt upon the initial hypothesis.

To resolve those inconsistencies, I divided my article into two basic parts. The empirical part was designed as an analysis of the behavior of states, that were mentioned as problematical regarding the broad usage of hedging as a strategy of the Southeast Asian countries, that is, those states whose behavior rather evoked the strategies of balancing or bandwagoning. It represented a selection of the least probable examples of following hedging of the ASEAN states group. The assumption was, that if I could detect components of hedging within those problematic cases, my hypothesis would have been confirmed because there were no doubts raised about strategies of other states from the group. To be concrete, I chose Vietnam, which was often tagged as an actor rather than balancing China through the deepening of cooperation with the United States; and then Cambodia, which was believed by some authors to be a state bandwagoning China. In a resulting and to some extent simplified model that was focused on a bilateral level of relation mainly set China to be a target state, I analyzed the researched states' behavior toward. I also presumed that potential development of relations with the United States in chosen sectors served the secondary states as a balancing part of their hedging strategy—simply saying as a hedge.

To reflect doubts about using hedging as an analytical tool, I presented my original definition of that concept. This definition offered two important innovations that I found missing, underrepresented, or not painstakingly elaborated in the works of other authors.

First, I decided to reflect on complaints made by Haacke (2019: 392) about the omission of concrete falsifiable variables that could be used in discerning hedging behavior by existing literature. Thus, I emphasized the need for accurate operationalization and delivered a list of basic indicators spread into three main categories. I also divided the process of analysis into two simple steps. The first focused on the non/existence of clarified official strategic documents or doctrines, which would hint hedging or a similar strategy was adopted by the highest policy and decision-makers of the analyzed country. The second step comprised of a set of concrete policies and measures that should be watched and checked in foreign political practice towards a target state and a hedge state. As a result, I focused on presenting hedging as a dual-track and contradictory policy, consisting of deliberate and simultaneous application of engagement and indirect balancing strategies. Those were aimed at maximization of profit from interaction with a target state (engagement) and at the same time maximization of security in case of negative development of mutual relations (indirect balancing).

The distribution into sectors also changed. This was the second main innovation I came with. Unlike many scholars, who understood economic and political sectors as spheres, where the engagement dominantly took place and connected balancing with a military sector; I embraced the assumption that both contradictory policies could be observed in all three sectors. Simply saying, no sector was more important than the other and we could talk about functional hedging only in case those policies were present in every one of them. Due to that, the higher complexity, rigor, and robustness of the concept were reached. To summarize, my operational definition delivered a tool to overcome the above-mentioned criticism and offered hedging as a fully-fledged analytical concept due to its emphasis on stricter operationalization, setting falsifiable variables, and the dual-track character of observed policies in all three clearly defined sectors.

Subsequently, I applied my operational definition of hedging to the foreign policies of Cambodia and Vietnam. I chose the period of 2009–2017, that is, the years of Barack Obama's presidential tenure in the United States, when the strategic rebalance/pivot of American



foreign policy to Asia was announced. The reason for that could be seen in the fact that the move established the “Asia-first policy,” accelerating American activity in the Asia-Pacific, and prompted a heated Chinese reaction. As a result, complex dynamics of the relations in the region changed and the power environment got under pressure. The nascent power competition provided potential conditions for weaker and smaller Southeast Asian actors to develop hedging policies. My goal was to answer the main research question: Was it possible to define the foreign policy strategies of Cambodia and Vietnam towards China and the United States during the 2009–2017 period as hedging?

In the case of Vietnam, I can say, its strategy toward power rivalry between China and the United States was influenced by key policy documents and doctrines, adopted since the end of the bipolar confrontation (Cold War). Those formed the basic framework for building relations with international partners, and they enabled Hanoi to follow policies that can be identified with key aspects of hedging. The most important was Resolution No. 8 of 2003, which was a part of the *On Defense of the Homeland in the New Situation* that set criteria for defining allies (*doi tac*) and foes (*doi tuong*). The ideological affinity was not seen as crucial anymore, being replaced by a concord with Vietnamese national interests. That led to diversification and multilateralization of the country's foreign policy, aimed at reaching the blending of interests of great powers in a way Vietnam could avoid excessive dependence on one of them and preserve its sovereignty and independence.

To conclude: Vietnam actively followed engagement and indirect balancing strategies in all observed sectors. The balancing part of the spectra experienced a dynamic development, mainly in the political and military sectors. It reflected Obama's willingness to continue to engage Vietnam and at the same time Hanoi's concerns about the rising influence of China and its asymmetrical position towards Beijing. Notwithstanding that situation, the intensive development of relations with China continued, being prominent especially in the economic sector. Engaging and balancing parts of hedging were mutually supplemented and thus the country did not move any closer to the balancing-bandwagoning points of the spectra. Therefore, Vietnam's foreign policy complied with the hedging concept, and even the dynamic development of balancing part of the spectra with the United States did not disrupt the overall architecture of the strategy. In that, I agreed with Grossman, who concluded that “*Vietnam persists in hedging, as it feels that there is no viable alternative*” (2020: 7).

In the case of Cambodia (especially in comparison with Vietnam), there was an absence of clear foreign-policy doctrines, that would define its strategy toward competing great powers, considerably. The country pointed to references in its constitutional documents or very broadly defined goals of its foreign policy. Those mentioned a need of following the national interests and defending independence and sovereignty. Nevertheless, their real impact was limited. A more important variable could be found in an effort of Sen's regime to eschew foreign criticism of its domestic policies and legitimize its power.

Thus, the relations between Cambodia and China flourished in the observed period. Phnom Penh developed the engagement part of spectra in all sectors actively, while the balancing aspects seemed quite problematic. Not only, Cambodia did not express concerns about China's power rise (which could be explained by an absence of territorial disputes), but it even took stances that supported it. It was evident in its support of one-China policy, public praise of bilateral relations by Prime Minister Sen and other prominent regime figures, or in taking pro-China positions on territorial disputes and national sovereignty in the South China Sea on the floor of ASEAN bodies.



On the contrary, Cambodia's activities in deepening relations with the United States were mild. The country understood risk coming from submission to China that could potentially threaten its political independence and a loss of trust of its ASEAN allies. Nevertheless, it did not strengthen its will to further develop relations with Washington. Thus, Cambodia fulfilled the criteria of observed variables only formally. But when we looked closer at their character and volume, it was clear their ability to serve as a functional balancing mechanism toward China was limited. The Hun Sen's government did not avoid deepening relations with Washington and profit from them when it found it advantageous (especially in the military sector), but it demonstrated its will to sever them when being criticized for repressions of domestic political opposition. The only exemption was the economic sector. There the United States played a role of a crucial export market and helped Cambodia to balance its foreign trade balance sheet that was badly hit by massive imports from China. As a result, Washington contributed to Sen's goal to transform Cambodia into a higher-middle-income country.

In the end, I can say that Cambodia followed both engagement and balancing policies, but its engaging activities were much more evident. The balancing policies took a significant shape in an economic sector only. Thus, based on criteria set in my operational definition, Cambodia did not leave a hedging framework in the observed period, however, we could talk about its gradual inclination toward bandwagoning (China) part of spectrum.

My article demonstrated, that notwithstanding the numerous variations in their foreign policies, the cases of Cambodia and Vietnam that were described as problematic or disputable, did not disrupt the hypothesis about a broad application of hedging on reactions of small states in Southeast Asia towards China-US power rivalry. Although the adopted policies hinted at possible nascent inclinations closer toward outer points of the balancing-bandwagoning spectra, we can conclude that even the change of the dynamic of the Southeast Asian regional order initiated by Obama's pivot and subsequent Chinese reaction did not lead to a leaving of dual-track hedging policies. On the contrary, in some sectors, we could trace a significant development (see Vietnam and its increase of military cooperation with the United States and China). From my point of view, the reason for the continuity of that ambiguous behavior can be found in the utility it provides to the secondary states. Facing the uncertainty about the future of the regional order, they choose strategies enabling them to profit as much as possible from the United States-China power rivalry and preserve their role as (at least partly) active agents in the transformative process. In this, my generalized conclusion corresponds with the ideas presented by Ikenberry. He argued that it will be the "middle states" that will preserve the power to shift the regional order. Nevertheless, they do not want to choose sides so far as they worry about their security and economic dependency on the competing great powers. The situation, when China serves as a provider of economic benefits, while the United States offers certain security assurances is seen as to some extent beneficially. So, the actors follow strategies, which help them to preserve that "dual hierarchical order" as long as it is stable (2016: 11, 22).

This article was also limited by space and by its focus which is why it left many accompanying aspects of hedging unanswered. Any future research could try to offer a broader scope and put the hedging strategies of the ASEAN states into a perspective of the United States-China power rivalry and an imbalanced power equilibrium in Asia-Pacific, that is, how they affect the way decision and policymakers in Washington and Beijing ponder about the evolution of the Asia-Pacific regional order and how they create their strategic documents. For as the realist school of international relations hinds (see Walt, 1985), the great powers adopt balancing strategies when facing their power peers.



Although those strategies have many different variations, they are very often based on alliance building. This theoretical knowledge is evidently mirrored in the reality of the Asia-Pacific as both great powers engage in this kind of activities—as was mentioned above, the United States relies on its hub-and-spokes system, originated in the Cold War era, while China launches more subtle multilateral projects focused mainly on economic cooperation and integration (BRI, AIIB, RCEP, etc.).

Nevertheless, the decision of the secondary states in Southeast Asia to adopt dual-track policies of hedging has changed the perspective. By doing so, they proclaimed their unwillingness to choose just one of the competing great powers and align with it, they showed a desire to prologue the “dual hierarchy” state of order (as explained by Ikenberry, 2016), and to try to present themselves as key and active players in the process of the regional order transition. Such assertive moves place obstacles into the alliance-building plans of the competing great powers as they prevent them from clinching traditional alliance deals with clients and draw transparent demarcation lines. Instead, it put them into a more complicated situation, resembling a competition over very fluid spheres of influence, which takes place in many different spheres and on different levels. That makes any predictions about future stances of these secondary states in a possible showdown between the great powers very complicated and requires them to adopt more sophisticated and complex strategic responses. Like it or not, the leaders in Washington and Beijing have to take this changed reality into consideration while defining their strategic goals in the region. However, they seem to be responsive to the demands of these states, as the language used in the strategic documents of recent years shows. For example, the discussion about the Indo-Pacific strategy in the United States incorporates a heightened emphasis on deepening relations not only with traditional allies but also working with emerging partners.

Future research could take the direction toward the usage of hedging as an alternative strategy not only for secondary states but also for great powers facing other great powers. Simply saying, it touches the question, of whether the above-mentioned mechanisms of a dual-track policy, intentionally and simultaneously combining profit-maximizing and security-maximizing measures, is a viable strategy for great powers, as it defies a traditional understanding of competing great powers relations as a zero-sum game (Murphy, 2017, 168). Although the idea is not completely new, some American authors were mentioning hedging as an umbrella term for ambiguous policies of US administrations (mainly Obama's one) toward China (see Hemmings, 2013; Medeiros, 2005), it would require more detailed research. That should answer, besides other things, which actor/actors the hedging great power uses as a hedge state in triangular relations including target state-hedging state-hedge state.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was supported by the grant project of the Faculty of Arts, the University of West Bohemia focused on the development of creative activities of Ph.D. students (SGS 2021-015 Podpora tvůrčí činnosti studentů na Katedře politologie a mezinárodních vztahů). It is partly based on my papers “*More than Just a Hedging: The Reactions of Cambodia and Vietnam to the Power Struggle between the USA and China in Southeast Asia*” presented at the 14th Annual Conference on Asian Studies (2020) held at Palacky University in Olomouc (Czech Republic) and “*The Catalysts and Inhibitors of the New American Balancing Alliances in the Indo-Pacific: The Case Study of the US-Vietnam Partnership*” presented at the United States: Diplomacy, Foreign Policy and International Law 2021 conference held at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan (Poland).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Koga works with Glen H. Snyder's understanding of these terms. He defines entrapment as a situation when the actor is dragged into conflict over the interests of its ally that are not mutually shared. Abandonment is then described as a "defection" that can take many different forms like abrogating the alliance, breaching of commitments, or a failure to provide support when it is needed and expected (1984: 466-467).
- ² Translation from Czech made by the author of the article.
- ³ By the term "elephant fight" Le Hong Hiep understands the power struggle between China and United States.
- ⁴ Nevertheless, Derek Grossman emphasizes that these "designations are mostly symbolic and do not necessarily represent the level of actual substantive cooperation" (2020: 34).
- ⁵ The statistics does not include services, it is focused on goods only.
- ⁶ Data are expressed in the value of USD in 2008.
- ⁷ The highest share was reached in 2014—38.24%.
- ⁸ SIPRI acknowledges that this figure is slightly uncertain.

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How to cite this article: Železný, J. (2022). More than just hedging? The reactions of Cambodia and Vietnam to the power struggle between the United States and China in times of Obama's "pivot to Asia". *Asian Politics and Policy*, 14(2), 216–248. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12628>