East Asia (2019) 36:229–241
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-019-09318-6

The Sino-US-Vietnam Triangle in a Belt and Road Era

Ngo Di Lan[1] · Truong-Minh Vu[2,3]

Received: 7 March 2019 / Accepted: 3 September 2019/ Published online: 16 October 2019

Abstract

Given systemic anarchy, small states like Vietnam have two basic foreign policy options: (1) align closely with one great power or (2) maintain a hedging posture. The choice between alignment and hedging for small states generally represents a trade-off between survival and autonomy and is mostly predicated on the action of relevant great powers. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is particularly important in this case, as it could be the key factor deciding Vietnam's overall posture toward China over the long term. While China's expansionist behavior in the South China Sea has pushed Vietnam toward alignment with the USA, the BRI, if implemented successfully, could convince Vietnam that maintaining the default hedging position is the best option.

Keywords Belt and road initiative · Asymmetry relationship · Sino-USA-Vietnam · South China Sea

Introduction

The first line in Kissinger's masterpiece Diplomacy reads: "in every century there seems to emerge a country with the power, the will and the intellectual and moral impetus to shape the entire international system in accordance with its own values" [21]. Although this line is originally intended to describe the USA in the twentieth century, it could just as easily apply to China in the twenty-first century.

✉ Ngo Di Lan
ngodilan@brandeis.edu

Truong-Minh Vu
vu.truong@vnu-itp.edu.vn

[1] Brandeis University, 415 South Street, Waltham, MA 02453, USA

[2] University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

[3] School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA), The Indiana University, Bloomington, USA

Indeed, China's rise has been thoroughly impressive. Between 1979 and 2014, China's annual GDP growth in real terms averaged nearly 10%, thus allowing the economy to double its size in real terms every 8 years [31]. Since the launch of Deng's Open-Door policy, it took China only three decades to overtake Japan as the world's second largest economy [23]. In PPP terms, some believe that China had already overtaken the USA as the world's largest economy in 2013 [28]. The lack of transparency with regard to military spending makes it hard to accurately estimate China's defense budget but scholars generally agree that China has the second largest defense budget in the world [25]. More importantly, the grand vision embodied in Xi Jinping's Belt and Road initiative (BRI) shows that China has both the will and a game plan to challenge the hegemonic position held by the USA since the end of World War II.

The BRI is possibly "the most ambitious geo-economic vision in recent history" [16] According to some estimates, "it will directly involve 65 countries, 4.4 billion people and 29% of global GDP ($2.1 trillion)" [24, 30]. It plans to create a massive network of connectivity by roads, railways, harbors, airports, pipelines, and fiber optic [55]. If the BRI comes into being as envisioned by the Chinese government, it will radically reshape the Eurasian geopolitical landscape as we know it. A modest approach that began as "road diplomacy" roughly 10 years ago [9, 17] has developed into a comprehensive initiative promoting China's global connections. In the recent years, China's investments and technology transfer and construction efforts over the past 10 years have created a web of cross-border linkages, technical networks, and economic dependencies in Southeast Asia.[1]

It is therefore unsurprising that this initiative has attracted much attention from foreign policy experts and China watchers since it was first unveiled in 2013.[2] While some have argued that the BRI represents China's grand strategy (for example, [47] and [32]), others have compared it to the Marshall Plan [1, 30, 35]. We argue that neither of these popular characterizations fully captures the essence of the BRI. The BRI is best conceptualized as a great power tool that generates "infrastructural power," i.e., a type of latent power that could be converted into hard or soft power.

To make sense of the BRI and explain its implications for Vietnam, we begin our analysis from the key assumption that there are two fundamentally different types of actors in the international system: great powers and small states. International politics is a game whereby great powers engage in a perpetual struggle for influence over small states, who then must resist this pull to maintain their survival and autonomy. Nowhere is this dynamic clearer than in the Indo-Pacific, where the USA and China are jockeying for power and influence. As a small state in mainland Southeast Asia, Vietnam is bound to be a part of this new hegemonic struggle between the USA and China. While China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea (SCS) in recent years has pushed Vietnam closer to the USA, if the BRI can bring prosperity to those states that participate, China could convince Vietnam to maintain its hedging posture.

[1] The importance of technological infrastructures springs also from export data and the involvement of Chinese firms in the worldwide expansion of infrastructures. For instance, the cumulative contract value of overseas railway construction projects in 2014 tripled the previous year and was at 24.7 billion US dollars [49]. In dam construction, Chinese companies have globally, and particularly in Southeast Asia, by far the largest share.

[2] Most major newspapers and think tanks have published some articles or briefings on China's BRI in recent years.

The rest of the paper is structured in three parts. First, we summarize current debate on the BRI and provide our own conceptualization of the BRI as a great power tool. In the second section, we argue that to fully understand the potential impact of the BRI on small states like Vietnam, it is necessary to explicitly distinguish great powers from small states. In the same section, we lay out our theory of small states foreign policy and the general relationship between great powers and small states. Lastly, we apply the theoretical framework developed in the previous sections to analyze Vietnam's reception of the BRI and this initiative's potential impact on Vietnamese foreign policy posture in the foreseeable future.

The Belt and Road Initiative—a New Type of Great Power Tool?

Ever since Xi announced the launching of what has become the BRI back in 2013, numerous foreign policy experts have opined on and analyzed extensively the motivations behind the BRI and its strategic implications. More recently, a number of scholars have referred to the BRI as China's new "grand strategy." Zhang [58] claims that "The Belt and Road Initiative is originally designed as a grand strategy" while Rolland [38] asserts that the BRI constitutes a grand strategy as it coordinates a large array of Chinese national resources to achieve political objectives. Pantucci and Lain [35] also view the BRI as China's grand strategy, claiming that it embodies the "March West" idea advocated by the Chinese scholar Wang Jisi. While the BRI may become fully integrated into China's emerging grand strategy, we do not believe that there are yet sufficient grounds to argue that the BRI by itself constitutes a grand strategy. A grand strategy has been defined as "a nation-state's theory about how to produce security for itself" [37] or "a calculated relationship on the part of a country's leaders of ends and means in the face of potential international opponents" [7]. Regardless of which definition one prefers, a grand strategy must be able to specify the ends as well as the means to achieve them. More importantly, there must be a clear prioritization of goals, given limited resources.

As of this moment, the BRI as is known to the public remains a vision without a detailed roadmap. It is also insufficiently comprehensive to be a grand strategy as it focuses only on one aspect of China's engagement with the world, while neglecting other important aspects such as how China should configure its military posture to meet potential security challenges. In our view, therefore, the BRI is better viewed as a key component of China's emerging grand strategy, in which China will play a more activist role on the international stage.

In another attempt to advance our understanding of the BRI, some have likened this initiative to the Marshall Plan. Perlez and Huang [36] characterize the BRI as "a more audacious version of the Marshall Plan, America's postwar construction effort." Chance [3] acknowledges that the BRI has been compared to the Marshall Plan and opines that the BRI is on par with or even surpasses the Marshall Plan in terms of its size and ambitions. Similarly, Shen [41] sees little difference between the Marshall Plan and the BRI as he argues that both serve five strategic aims: (i) boost exports, (ii) export currency, (iii) counter a rival, (iv) foster strategic divisions, and (v) siphon away diplomatic support. The Chinese government and many Chinese scholars have understandably rejected this characterization as they share a negative view of the Marshall

Plan. Zhang [58], for instance, believes that comparing the BRI to the Marshall Plan is tantamount to "denouncing" what China is doing. An op-ed on *China Daily* claims that the BRI is different from the Marshall Plan in that it does not discriminate membership on the basis of military alliances [41]. Xinhua's "Essential guide to understanding Belt and Road Initiative" pointedly rejects the Marshall Plan comparison, asserting that "The initiative is not a new version of the Marshall Plan, which gave aid only to American allies" [55]. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi himself dismissed comparisons between the BRI and the Marshall Plan, arguing that the latter is a geopolitical tool rooted in outdated Cold War mentality whereas the former is an inclusive cooperative enterprise [43].

In our view, there are significant differences between the Marshall Plan and the BRI. The Marshall Plan, despite having a long-term impact, was designed as a short-term economic response to a specific politico-economic crisis in post-WWII Europe [53]. The BRI is designed to be a long-term initiative that involves massive infrastructural constructions, aimed at boosting connectivity between key regions. Whereas the former is a discrete response to a crisis, the latter is a grand design to shape the strategic environment. Furthermore, the Marshall Plan was developed in the Cold War context where it was clear that the USA and the Soviet Union were heading toward strategic collision. While tension has risen between the USA and China in recent years, especially given Trump's determination to wage a "trade war" on China, it is still premature to characterize the current situation as a new Cold War. The American and Chinese economies are highly interdependent on one another and leaders in both countries understand that on many important global and regional issues, their cooperation is indispensable. Thus, it is not helpful to portray the BRI as China's Marshall Plan, despite certain similarities between the two initiatives.

The survey of the literature thus far reveals that the BRI has been subjected to extensive commentary and empirical analysis. For instance, some scholars have attempted to estimate BRI's benefits to the world economy in terms of welfare and trade [57] and examined its contributions to trade between participant countries, finding that landlocked EU countries would gain the most from BRI [11]. However, there have been relatively few attempts at theorizing this grand project and its potential impact, even though theorizing is particularly critical when the initiative is still taking shape and reliable data regarding the BRI remains scarce.[3] Empirical analysis of BRI while necessary is still of limited value at this moment for several reasons. First, it will take several years or more for all participating states to reach an agreement on the operationalization of the BRI. Furthermore, given the grand scale of the BRI, it would take decades to be fully implemented, assuming that everything goes according to plan. Within that long-time frame, the BRI can potentially morph in many unexpected ways. The Chinese government thus far has refrained from publishing detailed official maps of the project [35], suggesting that certain aspects of the project have not yet been finalized. In any event, because the BRI remains largely a "work in progress," conceptualizing this initiative in theoretical terms could provide much needed analytical leverage to advance our understanding of its potential strategic implications.

According to Nye [34], there are two fundamental kinds of power: hard power and soft power. Hard power is coercive in nature and therefore, it can cause change in the

[3] For exceptions, see for instance Cavanna [44] and Wang [52].

behavior of others relatively quickly. Yet, precisely because hard power is inevitably tied to some form of coercion, it is usually costly and may trigger blowback. Soft power is the power of attraction, usually coming from a nation's culture and values. Soft power is not easily manipulated like hard power and therefore, it is difficult to be directed toward specific ends, yet it can produce long-term gains that hard power cannot. For instance, the USA has been able to maintain a dynamic economy partly because there is a constant stream of people who willingly migrate to the USA to find a better life. Neither of these categories of power capture the essence of the BRI very well. More recently, two scholars at the National Endowment for Democracy proposed the "sharp power" to describe authoritarian regimes' muscular yet not violent attempts to interfere directly in the internal politics of democratic countries [50]. Yet, this concept is also not very useful to help us understand the BRI because the BRI is not a discrete tool that can be manipulated at will to achieve foreign policy goals.

In our view, the BRI is best conceptualized as a kind of great power tool that generates infrastructural power.[4] Infrastructural power is the kind of latent power that lurks in the background, which can be transformed into hard power or soft power depending on how states wield it. A clear example is the dense network of alliances that the USA had built around the world. Close ally-to-ally relationships bolster the image of the USA among foreign publics but also allow it to coerce its allies when necessary.[5] Similarly, China can employ the BRI as a form of infrastructural power and transform it into hard power through the bargaining process with states that want to become a part of the BRI. If the BRI successfully brings prosperity to its member states, it would help build soft power for China, who rightly deserves credits as the state that spearheaded this initiative. More importantly, however, is the fact that other BRI states are constantly aware that the stream of benefits that flow from the BRI can be interrupted if they act against the wishes of Beijing. While this does not ensure that China will always have its way, it does give Beijing significant leverage over other countries.

Small States in International Politics

To maximize the level of generalizability, classic IR paradigms such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism tend to conceptualize states in an abstract sense and avoid making qualitative distinctions between small states and great powers. One of the key assumptions in Waltz's neorealism is that states are *functionally similar*, despite the differences in their power and resources [51]. Yet, this assumption is not well grounded in reality as numerous works show that states vary along many dimensions other than raw power. Schroeder [40] shows that many European countries did perform different functions throughout history. For instance, Britain was the critical holder of the European balance of power while Russia saw itself as the guardian of the monarchical order in Europe. In the context of alliances, Kim [20] posits that some states are security

[4] Note that this is *not* the same kind of infrastructural power that some comparativists use to denote states' ability to enforce policy throughout their territory [22].

[5] For instance, it has been argued that the USA designed some alliances to maximize its control over allies' foreign policies [2].

providers while others are security consumers. Narizny [33] finds that even realist scholars, whose theories are based on the premise that states are functionally similar, implicitly assume that states are functionally dissimilar in their analysis. Thus, we should not build theories on the assumption that states are black boxes that differ only in terms of size and power.

The authors of these paradigms and theories are also overwhelmingly Western, Anglo-American scholars.[6] This is problematic because their theories inevitably reflect a great power historical experience that is alien to small states. While their theories are suitable to explain the foreign policies of great powers, it would be unreasonable to expect them to perform equally well in explaining the behavior of small states. For these reasons, we argue that small states constitute a distinct set of actors whose foreign policy behavior would be more accurately captured by a theory that is developed primarily to explain small states foreign policy.[7]

Our theory of small states foreign policy is based on six core assumptions. First, states exist in an anarchic world where a higher central authority above states does not exist. Second, states are non-unitary actors but there are certain core interests that receive support from the majority of key "stakeholders" in a state. Third, states are rational actors; i.e., they prioritize certain goals over others and facing an array of options and they choose the option perceived to be most effective in accomplishing the preferred goal. Fourth, because international politics is a struggle for autonomy, even though ensuring physical survival is every state's top priority, they also want to maximize autonomy.[8] Fifth, great powers are fundamentally different from small states. Whereas great powers can usually rely on its own capabilities to survive, small states must rely on others' assistance to guarantee their survival [33]. Lastly, great powers constantly engage in a competition for influence over small states, who then must react to these pressures and inducements to maximize their survival and autonomy.

In a world envisioned by our theory, a small state has two fundamental foreign policy options. First, it can choose to align itself to one great power, i.e., pegging its foreign policy to that of another great power. In reality, this often means entering into a formal or informal alliance with a great power and playing the role of a client. Second, it may choose hedging, which has two key features. First, a hedging state avoids exclusive alignment with any great power. Second, it actively tries to cultivate strong ties with multiple countries to reduce the risk of abandonment or entanglement.[9] This means that at least in theory, a state that is an ally of two opposing great powers can be seen as pursuing a hedging posture. However, in practice, because great powers usually do not permit their own clients to ally with another great power, states that pursue a hedging policy would avoid alliance commitments with any great power and yet simultaneously cultivate close relations with more than one of them.

[6] Well-known IR theorists in modern times such as Alexander Wendt, E. H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, Hedley Bull, John Ikenberry, John Mearsheimer, Joseph Nye, Kenneth Waltz, Robert Jervis, and Robert Keohane are all white, Anglo-Saxon males.

[7] There is a small but significant body of literature on small state foreign policy. See, for example, Keohane [19], Hey [12].

[8] See Harkett and Yalcin [10] for an extensive explanation as to why international politics is a struggle for autonomy rather than a struggle for power or influence as posited by realists.

[9] A number of works have discussed hedging in the context of China's rise. See Foot [8], Hiep [13, 10], and Medeiros [29, 23].

The choice between alignment and hedging inevitably involves a critical trade-off between survival and autonomy [10]. Alignment enhances a small state's survivability but reduces its autonomy because a small state that enjoys the protection of a great power patron must, in one way or another, conform to the foreign policy preferences of its patron as a form of "payment [39]." Conversely, hedging increases a small state's autonomy but reduces its survival chances. A hedging small state does not primarily depend on another great power to guarantee its survival and therefore, it can conduct an independent foreign policy. The downside is that when a threat eventually emerges, the hedging small state must primarily rely on its own capabilities to fend off the threat. Survival takes precedence over autonomy because if a state does not physically exist as an independent political entity, by definition it does not have any autonomy left. However, since survival is binary (a state either survives or does not survive) whereas autonomy is ordinal (a state can have more or less autonomy), once a state has ensured its survival, it would want to maximize the level of autonomy that it can enjoy. All else being equal, the more autonomy a state has the higher the likelihood that it will be able to advance its interests. Therefore, according to our theory, states should pursue alignment only when it perceives a grave threat to its survival. What constitutes a "grave threat" may vary from case to case, but it usually takes the form of a potential or actual attack on the homeland of another state that could kill a significant portion of the target state's population.[10] No state would consider such an attack a low-level threat. Without facing a grave threat, states should prefer hedging over alignment and since states rarely have to fear for its survival, the default foreign policy choice for small states should be hedging.

It is worth noting that our theory does not imply that small states always adjust their policy rapidly between hedging and alignment. In other words, we do not argue that small states would immediately switch from hedging to alignment as soon as a grave threat emerges or that they would immediately abandon alignment in favor of hedging once the grave threat has subsided. It would be more realistic to expect some time lag between perception and policy change, which would vary depending on the degree of change perceived by the policymakers and the level of policy inertia. Hence, it would be normal for states to switch policies later than they should have (e.g., pursue alignment even though the threat has disappeared). Furthermore, because the international environment rarely changes abruptly overnight and there is always a "reality-perception gap," we expect states to change their policies gradually rather than decisively. Thus, small states should switch from hedging to alignment and vice versa in gradual steps rather than in a single decisive move. This point is critical because the slow pace at which policy changes provides a window of opportunity for great powers to adjust their policies to maximize influence over the small states. No great power wants to be seen as threatening because small states would flock to the side of its rival to seek security but it can only prevent the small states from joining its rival when policy changes gradually as it would have the time to terminate the threatening policy and possibly carry out alternative policies. As we shall see in the next section, China's assertiveness in the SCS has pushed Vietnam closer toward alignment with the USA.

[10] It is highly likely that states have different levels of threat tolerance. As such, it would be reasonable to expect that the smaller the country is geographically, the more expansive its definition of a grave threat would be.

Despite having developed closer ties with the USA in recent years, Vietnam has not yet abandoned hedging in favor of alignment with the USA. China, therefore, has a window of opportunity whereby it can use the BRI to woo Vietnam away from the USA and convince Hanoi that hedging remains Vietnam's best policy option.

Vietnam Amidst the Sino-USA Power Struggle

Sino-Vietnamese relations are particularly complex because despite ideological and cultural affinities as well as high levels of economic interdependence, both countries have been frequently at war in the past.[11] Although the Vietnam War is still fresh in the memory of many Vietnamese, the average Vietnamese today has a much more favorable view of the USA than China, despite the latter's massive supply of military and economic aid to North Vietnam during the war. This negative attitude of the Vietnamese general public toward China is likely shaped by two critical events: (i) the Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1979 and (ii) China's seizure of Vietnam's islands in the Spratlys including Johnson Reef in 1988.

In the post-Cold War era, four factors characterized China's main interests in Vietnam: (i) to gain advantage in territorial disputes with Hanoi, (ii) to keep Hanoi from veering toward the USA, (iii) to encourage Hanoi to pursue pro-China policies on the Taiwan issue and other international affairs, and (iv) to encourage Hanoi to give preferential treatment to Chinese products and businesses [4]. Since the early 1990s' normalization of Vietnam-China ties, Hanoi has assiduously pursued a strategy of hedging its bets toward China: on the one hand, it has undertaken measures to increase economic engagement as well as deepen party-to-party relations; on the other hand, Vietnam has sought to diversify its external strategic relations by reaching out to other powers (i.e., Russia, the USA, and India and Japan more recently) in order to check Chinese territorial adventurism.[12] Russia in particular has long been one of Vietnam's most important strategic partner, partly because it remains the primary supplier of military hardware for Vietnam and partly because of traditional ties between the countries since the Cold War.

While Beijing and Hanoi cooperate where they can, there has also been a deepening struggle in this relationship. The context has shifted to what is aptly called "struggling co-evolution," as the two countries are continuously searching for a "glue" to keep their relations together for both their international and domestic affairs [48]. Meanwhile, Beijing wants to control Hanoi within its sphere of influence as much as possible, and Vietnam tries to manage the asymmetries to maintain its autonomy.

As a country that is projected to be a part of the Maritime Silk Road, Vietnam has openly embraced the BRI while remaining cautious at the same time. For instance, President Tran Dai Quang attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation during a state visit to Beijing in May 2017. Consequently, both sides signed MOUs regarding the BRI when Xi paid a visit to Hanoi last November [14]. Vietnamese news outlets also generally published positive articles about the BRI. For instance, Công an nhân dân online, which is one of the mainstream news outlets in Vietnam,

[11] For a comprehensive analysis of Sino-Vietnamese relations, see Womack [54].
[12] For a discussion of how Vietnam is pursuing closer relations with these powers, see Hiep and Tsvetov [15].

notes that all scholars and experts at a joint Sino-Vietnamese conference on the BRI agree that this initiative would provide new cooperative opportunities for countries in Asia [5]. Meanwhile, Xinhua News publishes an interview of a Vietnamese foreign policy expert who opines that the BRI can become a future Great Wall that connects friends and partners to achieve stronger socioeconomic development [56].

However, there are also clear signs that Vietnam is concerned about the potential implications of the BRI. Viet Nam News [43] published an article warning that "Nations should look beyond mere economic gains at questions of sovereignty and excessive dependence when considering participation in China's Belt and Road (BRI) initiative." While attending the BRI forum, Tran Dai Quang emphasized the principle of equality in the implementation of the BRI [26]. This shows that while Vietnam is certainly open to the idea behind the BRI, it is also aware of the risks associated with such an enterprise, namely that it would become even more dependent on China and thereby allowing China to use the BRI to gain advantage in the SCS dispute. Furthermore, because of Vietnamese entrenched negative perception of China, cooperating with China in mega infrastructural projects can easily become a political taboo that would trigger public outcries and oppositions. For instance, the Vietnamese public is concerned that the passage of the "Three special zones" bill and the "North-South Expressway" project would lead to great security risks [1]; [27]. While the Vietnamese National Assembly postponed indefinitely the passage of the "Three special zones" bill, the "North-South Expressway" was still promoted by the Ministry of Transport; however, it has faced strong public opinion against the "Chinese factor."

Nevertheless, we argue that to understand the potential impact of the BRI on Vietnam over the long term, one must look closely at the strategic context involving the Sino-USA-Vietnam triangle. As a small state occupying a pivotal position in Southeast Asia, Vietnam has long been a part of the Sino-American "great game." Traditionally, Vietnam has been closer to China due to their geographical and ideological proximities, yet China's assertive actions to buttress its maritime claims in the SCS in recent years, including the deployment of the HYSY-981 oilrig within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone in 2014 and its rejection of the PCA court ruling in 2016, have pushed Vietnam away from China and toward the USA. During the Obama years, the USA-Vietnam relationship had been upgraded to a "comprehensive partnership" and on his visit to Vietnam in 2016, Obama finally abolished the longstanding lethal weapons ban on Vietnam [18]. Despite Trump's decision to pull the USA out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, USA-Vietnam relations have not lost momentum under Trump. In fact, there is a case to be made that this relationship has never been better. Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc was the first ASEAN leader to meet with the newly elected President Donald Trump. In August 2017, Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich traveled to Washington, during which both sides agreed on a US carrier visit to Vietnam next year, which is unprecedented. Shortly after Lich's trip, General Nguyen Chi Vinh made a highly symbolic visit to the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier, which was previously deployed to the SCS on a patrolling mission. More importantly, Trump became the first American president to visit Vietnam in his first term when he attended the APEC summit and visited Hanoi last year. Even though a number of experts have called for a "USA-Vietnam alliance," there is no sign that both sides are moving toward an alliance as of now. In fact, Vietnamese leaders have long insisted on maintaining a "three Nos" defense policy: no military alliance, no stationing of foreign

troops on Vietnamese soil, and no reliance on one country against another [47]. This may change in the future but as long as Vietnam maintains this defense policy, it is clear that Hanoi still prefers hedging over alignment.

A fundamental problem for Vietnam's political elite is the absence of convergence in "threat perceptions" toward China. At the Tenth Plenum of the 11th Party Congress earlier this year, the Vietnamese Communist Party's (VCP) chief, Nguyen Phu Trong, faced with the age-old question of whether "China is friend or foe" emphasized that the answer could be found in the party documents and resolutions of the Central Committee. Resolution No. 28 on contemporary strategies for national defense states that the Standing Committee of the Central Committee continues to focus on identifying "partners and targets" (đối tác và đối tượng). What constitutes a strategic "partner?" The document asserts: "Those who respect the sovereignty of Vietnam, who seek to establish and expand their friendship and equal, win-win cooperation with Vietnam, are considered as our partners; however, those who plan at subverting our nation's objectives, as well as our project of building and protecting the Fatherland are considered as our adversaries." [46] However, this deliberately ambiguous characterization of what constitute a "target" also opens the way to embrace the USA if China pushes too hard in the SCS. The mere fact that we have not seen talks of a possible alliance between the USA and Vietnam alliance does not mean that such a scenario can be ruled out indefinitely. Vietnam has pursued a military alliance with the Soviet Union when it faced a two-pronged threat from China and Cambodia [4]; thus, there is no reason why it could not seek another alliance if it faces a grave threat from China in the near future. In fact, if Vietnam perceives sustained hostility from China in the SCS, the move from hedging to alignment, at least informally, seems highly probable.

Fortunately for China, an alliance between Vietnam and the USA is not an inevitable outcome. In this context, the BRI could play a potentially important role if it does deliver the goods that it promises. As long as Vietnam sees tangible benefits from the BRI, China would have extra leverage over Vietnam as both sides would be bargaining over various matters in the shadow of the BRI. As a tool that generates infrastructural power, the BRI is more effective than other hard power tools like military threats or economic sanctions because it is subtler and therefore less likely to cause blowback. Meanwhile, it is more easily manipulated than attractive cultural values and takes much less time to achieve desirable goals; thus, it makes for a more reliable "weapon" than other soft power tools. If China can help Vietnam prosper via the BRI, it can even build a more attractive and less threatening image in Vietnamese minds. In other words, the BRI may help China slow down the momentum in USA-Vietnam relations and convince Vietnam that maintaining a hedging posture is the best way for it to survive and prosper in a world dominated by great powers.

Conclusion

Yang Jiechi is said to have reminded ASEAN diplomats during a meeting that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact." While his insensitive remark was not well received in many foreign capitals, Yang has a point. All countries are not equal: some are great powers while the rest are small states. Although both are states in the most basic sense on the term, great powers and small states are

fundamentally different types of actors. Great powers can wield many policy tools that are unavailable to small states. One of the clearest examples of a great power tool is the BRI, which generates infrastructural power.

However, there remains many "known unknowns" as well as "unknown unknowns" about the BRI as it will take decades for this grand design to be fully implemented. The case of the Mekong River is particularly instructive in this case. Although this issue is much smaller than BRI as a whole, the process of finding principles and agreeing on certain value judgments for the use of the Mekong's waters remains open-ended after years of back and forth from all sides. What is certain is the fact that the BRI will have an enormous influence on many small states in the coming years and decades. As a small state that has a complicated past with many great powers, Vietnam has always been mindful of the risk of letting history repeat itself. To avoid being the pawn in a great power game, Vietnam has long decided to maintain a hedging posture. However, as we argued in this paper, China's recent assertiveness in the SCS has slowly pushed Vietnam away from its default hedging position toward the USA. The BRI, if successfully implemented, will provide China with what it needs to convince Vietnam that China is not as threatening as it seems and that in any event, Vietnam would be better off upholding its current hedging policy rather than siding with the USA.

References

1. BBC Vietnam. (2018, August 6). Đổ tiền cho đặc khu có rủi ro tầm quốc gia [Invest money in special zones is a national risk]. *BBC Vietnam*. Retrieved on 5 August, 2019 from https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-45080367.
2. Cha, V. D. (2016). *Powerplay: the origins of the American alliance system in Asia*. Princeton.
3. Chance, A. (2016, January 26). The 'Belt and Road Initiative' is not 'China's Marshall Plan'. Why not? *The Diplomat*. Retrieved January 4, 2018, from https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/the-belt-and-road-initiative-is-not-chinas-marshall-plan- why-not
4. Chanda, N. (1987). *Brother enemy–the war after the war: history of Indo-China after the Fall of Saigon*. Harcourt Brace.
5. Chi, H. (2017, August 28). Việt Nam với sáng kiến "Vành đai và Con đường" [Vietnam and the Belt and Road initiative]. *Cong an nhan dan online*. Retrieved on January 5, 2018 from http://cand.com.vn/Su-kien-Binh-luan-thoi-su/Viet-Nam-voi-sang-kien-Vanh-dai- va-Con-duong-455683/
6. Dosch, J., & Vuving, A. L. (2008). The impact of China on governance structures in Vietnam. DIE Discussion Paper, 14/2008
7. Dueck, C. (2015). *The Obama doctrine: American grand strategy today*. Oxford University Press.
8. Foot, R. (2006). Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging. *International affairs*, *82*(1), 77–94.
9. Garver, J. W. (2006). Development of China's overland transportation links with Central, South-West and South Asia. *The China Quarterly*, 185, 1–22.
10. Harknett, R. J., &Yalcin, H. B. (2012). The struggle for autonomy: a realist structural theory of international relations. *International Studies Review*, *14*(4), 499–521.
11. Herrero, A. G., & Xu, J. (2017). China's Belt and Road Initiative: can europe expect trade gains?. *China & World Economy*, *25*(6), 84–99.
12. Hey, J. A. (Ed.). (2003). *Small states in world politics: explaining foreign policy behavior*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
13. Hiep, L. (2013). Vietnam's hedging strategy against China since normalization. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 333–368.
14. Hiep, L. (2017). Pull and push: Sino-Vietnamese relations and President Xi's Hanoi visit. *ISEAS Perspective, 92*.
15. Hiep, L. & Tsvetov, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Vietnam's foreign policy under Doi Moi*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.

16. Hillman, J. (2017, May). China's "Belt and Road" initiative must become a strategy.*Global Economics Monthly, 6*(5). Retrieved from https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-must-become-strategy.
17. Holslag, J. (2010). China's roads to influence. *Asian Survey*, 50(4), 641–662.
18. Keane, A., & Olorunnipa, T. (2016, May 23). U.S. lifts lethal weapons ban to Vietnam 40 years after war. *Bloomberg Politics.* Retrieved on January 5, 2018 from https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-05-23/obama-says-u-s-lifting-ban-on-lethal- arms-sales-to-vietnam
19. Keohane, R. O. (1969). Lilliputians' dilemmas: small states in international politics. *International organization*, *23*(2), 291–310.
20. Kim, T. (2016). *The supply side of security: a market theory of military alliances*. Stanford University Press.
21. Kissinger, H. (1994). *Diplomacy.* Simon & Schuster.
22. Lai, B., & Slater, D. (2006). Institutions of the offensive: domestic sources of dispute initiation in authoritarian regimes, 1950–1992. *American Journal of Political Science*, *50*(1), 113–126.
23. Las, L. (2011). Sino-Japanese relations toward the second decade of the 21st century. *Contemporary European studies,* 53–63.
24. Leverett, F., & Bingbing, W. (2017).The New Silk Road and China's evolving grand strategy. *The China Journal*, *77*(1), 110–132.
25. Liff, A. (2015). Japan's defense policy: abe the evolutionary. *The Washington Quarterly*, *38*(2), 79–99.
26. Lynh, K. (2017, May 16). Việt Nam đề xuất các nguyên tắc trong 'Vành đai và Con đường' [Vietnam proposes principles concerning the Belt and Road]. *VNExpress.*Retrieved January 5, 2018 from https://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/the-gioi/viet-nam-de-xuat-cac-nguyen-tac-trong-vanh-dai-va-con-duong-3585337.html
27. Mai Chi. (2018, August 11). Sốt sắng lo chất lượng nhà đầu tư và "bẫy nợ" Trung Quốc tại cao tốc Bắc-Nam [Concerns about the quality of investers and Chinese "debt trap" regarding the North-South highway]. *Dân Trí.* Retrieved on 30 August, 2019 from https://dantri.com.vn/kinh-doanh/sot-sang-lo-chat-luong-nha-dau-tu-va-bay-no-trung-quoc-tai-cao-toc-bac-nam-20190811094323485.htm
28. Mayer, M. (2018). China's rise as Eurasian power: the revival of the Silk Road and its consequences. In *Rethinking the Silk Road China's Belt and Road Initiative and emerging Eurasian relations* (pp. 1-42). Palgrave MacMillan.
29. Medeiros, E. S. (2005). Strategic hedging and the future of Asia-Pacific stability. *The Washington Quarterly*, *29*(1), 145–167
30. Menon, S. (2017, April 28). The unprecedented promises – and threats – of the Belt and Road Initiative [Editorial]. *Brookings*. Retrieved January 4, 2018, from https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-unprecedented-promises-and-threats-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative/
31. Morrison, W. (2015). China's economic rise: history, trends, challenges, and implications for the United States. (CRS Report No. RL33534). Retrieved from Congressional Research Service https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33534.pdf
32. Morrow, J. D. (1991). Alliances and asymmetry: an alternative to the capability aggregation model of alliances. *American Journal of Political Science*, *35*(4), 904–933.
33. Narizny, K. A critique of the newest realism. *International Security, 42*(2), 155–190.
34. Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: the means to success in world politics*. Public Affairs.
35. Pantucci, R., & Lain, S. (2016). China's grand strategy: the Belt and Road Initiative. *Whitehall Papers*, *88*(1), 7–16.
36. Perlez, J., & Huang, Y. (2017, May 13). Behind China's $1 Trillion plan to shake up the economic order. *New YorkTimes*. Retrieved January 5, 2018, from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/13/business/china-railway-one-belt-one-road-1-trillion-plan.html
37. Posen, B. (2014). *Restraint: a new foundation for US grand strategy*. Cornell University Press.
38. Rolland, N. (2017). The Belt and Road Initiative: China's grand strategy? *China Analysis, 234*. Retrieved from http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/grands_designs_does_china_have_a_grand_strategy
39. Rothstein, R. L. (1968). *Alliances and small powers*. Columbia University Press.
40. Schroeder, P. (1994). Historical reality vs. neo-realist theory. *International Security*, *19*(1), 108–148.
41. Shen, S. (2016, February 6). How China's 'Belt and Road' compares to the Marshall Plan. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved January 4, 2018, from https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/how-chinas-belt-and-road-compares-to-the-marshall-plan/
42. Steinbock, D. (2017, May 15). How the Belt and Road could change the 21st century. *China Daily*. Retrieved January 5, 2018, from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017-05/15/content_29356483.htm

43. Swaine, M. D. (2015). Chinese views and commentary on the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative. *China Leadership Monitor*, *47*(2), 3.
44. Unlocking the Gates of Eurasia: China's Belt and Road Initiative and its implications for U.S. grand strategy. *Texas National Security Review, 2*(3).
45. Viet Nam News. (2017, October 7). Tread carefully on China's Belt and Road initiative: experts. *Viet Nam News.* Retrieved on January 5, 2018 from http://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/395203/tread-carefully-on-chinas-belt-and-road- initiative-experts.html
46. Vietnamese Communist Party, *Resolution No. 28 of the Central Committee* (2014)
47. VietnamNet. (2013, March 9). The outstanding feature of the Vietnamese defense policy. *VietnamNet.* Retrieved on January 5, 2018 from http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/special-reports/72428/the-outstanding-feature-of-the-vietnamese-defense-policy.htm
48. Vu, T. (2017). The politics of 'struggling co-evolution': trade, power, and vision in Vietnam's relations with China in *International Relations and Asia's Southern Tier,* Springer, 2017.
49. Vu, T. M., & Mayer, M. (2019). Hydropower infrastructure and regional order making in the Sub-Mekong region. *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, *61*(1).
50. Walker, C., & Ludwig, J. (2017, November 16). The meaning of sharp power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved from https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power
51. Waltz, K. N. (1979). Theory of international politics. Long Grove.
52. Wang, Y. (2016). Offensive for defensive: the belt and road initiative and China's new grand strategy. *The Pacific Review*, *29*(3), 455–463.
53. Westad, O. A. (2017). *The Cold War: a world history.* Basic Books.
54. Womack, B. (2006). *China and Vietnam: the politics of asymmetry.* Cambridge University Press.
55. Xinhua. (2017, May 13). Essential guide to understanding Belt and Road Initiative. *Xinhua Net*. Retrieved January 4, 2018, from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/13/c_136279142.htm
56. Yanna, L., & Long, B. (2017, August 27). Interview: Vietnamese expert sees Belt and Road Initiative as future Great Wall connecting friends, partners to achieve stronger socioeconomic development. *Xinhua Net.* Retrieved on January 5, 2018 from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-08/27/c_136558580.htm
57. Zhai, F. (2018). China's belt and road initiative: a preliminary quantitative assessment. *Journal of Asian Economics*, *55*, 84–92.
58. Zhang, Y. (2017). Belt and Road Initiative as a Grand Strategy. In *China's Belt and Road Initiatives and Its Neighboring Diplomacy* (pp. 3-12).