

# Vietnam's Strategic Options in the South China Sea (SCS) in the Age of **President Donald Trump**

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# OUTLINE



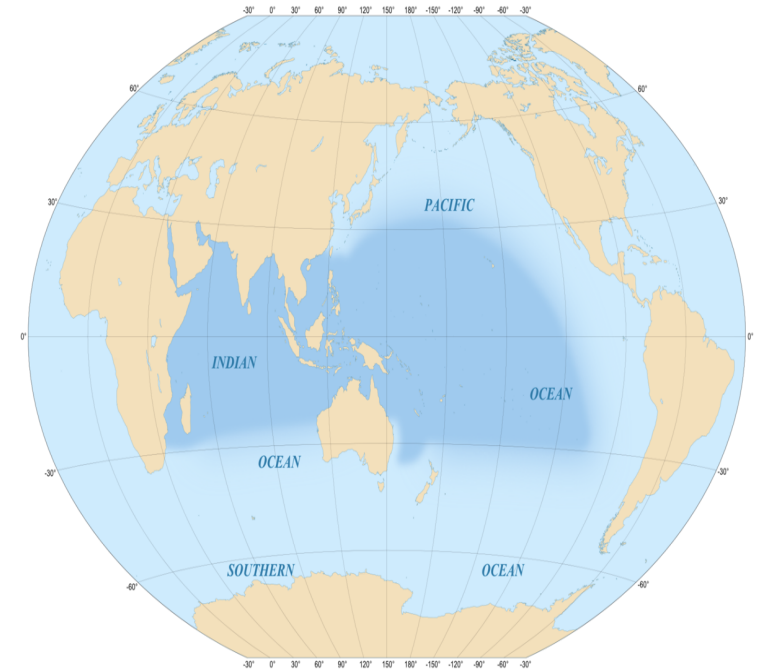
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

- 2017 marked dramatical changes
  - Presidency of Donald Trump and his five-Asian country 12-day trip
  - Brexit
  - Terrorist attack and migration in Europe
  - The North Korean nuclear program
  - The XIX Congress of CPC,
  - ASEAN at 50 years
- Vietnam needs to weight its strategic options carefully, particularly with regards to major powers with a stake in the dispute.

## 2. CURRENT SITUATION IN THE SCS

- Trump ended Obama's "pivot/rebalance" to Asia-Pacific by TPP withdrawal, and using new term "Indo-Pacific" region
- The US resumed its Freedom of Navigation Operations against China's claim in the SCS
- The Philippines shelved Manila's July 2016 victory in the CPA to dispute China's, leaving Vietnam holding the bag on the issue
- On July 12, 2017 the Philippines sanctioned drilling on Reed Bank before the end of the year
- ASEAN and China considered the proposed framework for COC. However, it does not mention the legal nature of the COC; the area it will apply to; how to settle dispute, and how to ensure compliance





## 2. CURRENT SITUATION IN THE SCS

- China's policy in the SCS continues to be assertive:
- *“China urges the relevant party to ease the relevant unilateral infringing activities and with practical actions safeguard the hard-earned positive situation in the South China Sea”* (Lu Kang, China's FM spokesperson).
- China does not recognize the PCA decision
- China tried to prevent interference by “outside parties”: *“If there are still some non-regional forces or forces in the region that don't want to see stability in the SCS and they still want to stir up troubles in the SCS, we need to stand together and say no to them together”* (China's FM Wang Yi)



### 3. Vietnam's Strategic Options: 1) Balancing (low)

- Balancing in essence means a status quo power will assume the task of checking a rising power either by itself or an alliance with other powers.
- A balancing strategy may still be adopted indirectly by *engaging closer with the US and its allies in the region while alienating itself from China* in order to contain it.
- This option, however, is highly unlikely due to Vietnam's (1) *close entanglement with China* and (2) *commitment to non-alignment politics*





### 3. Vietnam's Strategic Options: 2) Bandwagoning (low)

- Bandwagoning is the complete opposite of balancing: Rather than aligning with the rising power, a state would defer nominal or formal submission to the rising state in exchange for peaceful relations or potential benefits.
- This would involve Vietnam moving away from the US and embrace China. This option is unlikely due to (1) historical distrust of China which causes wariness from Vietnam's part, and (2) doing so will likely damage Vietnam's current ties with other powers like the US or Japan.



# 3. Vietnam's Strategic Options: 3) Hedging (high)

- Hedging as “a behaviour in which a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects, under the situation of high-uncertainties and high-stakes”.
- 4 components of Vietnam’s hedging strategy vis-à-vis China:
  - *Economic pragmatism (cooperation based on economic interests),*
  - *Direct engagement (exchanges of bilateral communications and building mutual trust),*
  - *Soft balancing (deepening ties with other major powers and more effective participation in multilateral arrangements in pursuit of specific agendas), and*
  - *Hard balancing (enhancing its own military capacity as deterrence).*



# 4.CONCLUDING REMARKS

- World affairs in general in 2017 is not pessimistic.
- All countries have to adapt to the new situation, consider their strategies
- Vietnam foreign policy: multilateralism and diversification; reform combining with integration
  - Balancing
  - Bandwagoning
  - Hedging
- Nevertheless, Vietnam needs to be careful not to disregard other viable options on the table.



# THANK YOU



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