

Observations Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak: The US-China Rivalry in Vietnam and the Philippines *

Ornthicha Duangratana **

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Abstract

As the novel coronavirus pandemic had escalated the big-power rivalry and opened new avenues of competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China, the paper seeks to determine the effects of the new developments on the hedging strategy of Vietnam and the Philippines. Through the comparative case study methodology, continuity and changes in Vietnam's and Philippines' positioning between the two powers are inferred with the presentations of the two Southeast Asian states' maneuverings before and the states' reactions after the virus outbreak. The information is compiled from official papers, governments' statements, English-language newspapers as well as scholarly literatures. The preliminary observations in the study show that there is continuity in the states' employment of hedging strategy, but the recent phase of the big-power contention has launched the two states to lean more to the United States. As smaller states in the region that is stuck between the two pulls of the rival powers and with the uncertain future posed by the COVID-19 outbreak, the hedging strategy allows for the needed flexibility to ensure the states' survival and benefits. Also, under the condition of heightened security threat projected from China in the South China Sea that became more aggressive during the coronavirus outbreak and if the threat continues to prevail, the study suggests that the security ties between the two Southeast Asian states and the US are and will continue to be strengthened.

Keywords: US-China Rivalry, COVID-19, Vietnam, Philippines

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** Lecturer in Pridi Banomyong International College, Thammasat University



ข้อสังเกตเกี่ยวกับความขัดแย้งระหว่างสหรัฐอเมริกาและจีนในเวียดนามและ ฟิลิปปินส์ท่ามกลางการแพร่ระบาดของโควิด-19 *

อริชา ดวงรัตน์ **

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้จะศึกษาผลกระทบของพัฒนาการใหม่ที่เกิดขึ้นจากการระบาดของโควิด-19 ที่มีต่ออุทธศัลศร์ในการสร้างหลักประกันความเสี่ยงของประเทศในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ การแพร่ระบาดของไวรัสโคโรนาได้ทำให้ความขัดแย้งระหว่างสหรัฐอเมริกาและสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีน ทวีความรุนแรงมากขึ้น และได้เปิดมิติใหม่ของการขยายอิทธิพลในเวทีโลก ของมหาอำนาจทั้งสอง บทความนี้จะศึกษาในเชิงเปรียบเทียบของความต่อเนื่องและการเปลี่ยนแปลง ในท่าทีของเวียดนามและของฟิลิปปินส์ โดยจะนำเสนอจุดยืนของประเทศทั้งสองที่มีต่อสหรัฐฯ และจีนก่อนและหลังการระบาดของโรคโควิด-19 โดยข้อมูลที่ใช้ในการศึกษาได้รวบรวมมาจากเอกสารของทางการ แหล่งการณ์ของรัฐบาล หนังสือพิมพ์ภาษาอังกฤษ และบทความทางวิชาการต่าง ๆ ข้อสังเกตเบื้องต้นของการศึกษาจะแสดงให้เห็นถึงความต่อเนื่องของการใช้กลยุทธ์ประกันความเสี่ยง ของประเทศในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ แต่หลังการระบาดของไวรัสโคโรนาจะเห็นความเปลี่ยนแปลง ของท่าทีของประเทศเหล่านี้ที่ค่อยๆ โน้มเอียงไปทางการพึ่งพาสหรัฐอเมริกามากขึ้น ด้วยเหตุผลว่า เวียดนามและฟิลิปปินส์เป็นประเทศเล็กในภูมิภาคซึ่งอยู่ระหว่างการซึ่งชิงความได้เปรียบระหว่าง มหาอำนาจทั้งสอง ประกอบกับอนาคตที่ไม่แน่นอนสีบเนื่องมาจากการระบาดของโควิด-19 การดำเนินกลยุทธ์ที่มุ่งสร้างหลักประกันความเสี่ยงจะเป็นปัจจัยให้เกิดความยืดหยุ่นที่จำเป็น เพื่อความอยู่รอดและการได้มาซึ่งผลประโยชน์ นอกจากนี้ การศึกษาขั้นนี้จะชี้ให้เห็นว่า ในช่วงที่มี การแพร่ระบาดของไวรัสโคโรนา ท่าทีของจีนในทะเลจีนได้กลับเพิ่มความแข็งกร้าวมากขึ้น และหากยังเป็นเช่นนี้ต่อไป ความสัมพันธ์ด้านความมั่นคงของเวียดนามและฟิลิปปินส์ที่เริ่มโน้มเอียง ไปทางสหรัฐอเมริกาจะยิ่งเพิ่มความแน่นแฟ้นมากขึ้น

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** อาจารย์ประจำ วิทยาลัยนานาชาติปรีดี พนมยงค์ มหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์

Introduction

Currently, the prominent big-power competition revolves around the rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China. The United States, as the main global power after the Cold War, is faced with the rising power of China. Increasingly the relationship between the two countries has become strained during the past decade. Due to this rivalry, Southeast Asia, a region that manifests strategic and economic importance, has, at the same time, emerged as a significant arena for the Sino-American feud in which the Southeast Asian states attempt to navigate between the pulls of the two powers.

The competition between the two powers in Southeast Asia covers a wide range of areas from diplomacy and non-military domains such as infrastructure development, technology, trade, and investments to military and maritime security. Both the US and China are pursuing robust diplomatic initiatives in traditional diplomacy and cultural exchanges. The Chinese power is making headway in the realms of infrastructure development, trade, and investment by which the economic appeals of China are apparent among the Southeast Asian states. Concurrently, the US, with its military superiority and longstanding network of partners, maintains a strong hold in the military areas of armaments, alliances, and maritime security. Additionally, the power dynamics are especially complicated amid the Chinese aggressiveness in the South China Sea where the two states in question; Vietnam and the Philippines are among the claimant states. Under the weight of the non-military and military concerns, the Southeast Asian states with different conditions attempt to maneuver between the two powers (Shambaugh, 2018).

Now the coronavirus outbreak has dominated the issues in the global arena from the year 2020 to the present. The rivalry between the US and China has intensified while new avenues of competition have materialized. Between the two powers, a blame game of pinpointing the country responsible for the pandemic is looming. At the same time, each is battling to promote its own interest and discredit the other in the effort to overcome the epidemic. The perceptions of the countries' abilities to handle the coronavirus's dire effects have significant bearings on the powers' influence in international affairs. Moreover, the fields of information, aid in alleviating the COVID-19 situation as well as vaccine development and distribution have become new areas of competition between the US and China in smaller states (deLisle, 2020).



In regards to smaller states having to make strategic choices to ensure their survival in an international system dominated by greater powers with superior resources, three main alignment strategies can be identified: balancing; bandwagoning; and hedging. According to Stephen M. Walt (1987, p. 17), on one hand, balancing is the strategy of “allying with others against the prevailing threat”. That is, when faced with a potential threat from a state that has augmented military power, the threatened states may increase power by building their own military strength or ally with one or more states to balance against and ultimately deter the threat (Walt, 1987, p. 18). On the other hand, Walt (1987, p.17) defines bandwagoning as the states’ “alignment with the source of danger.” Apart from the states’ accommodation to the pressure of threat from the dominant power, Randall L. Schweller (1994, pp. 88-89) argues that bandwagoning is driven by gains. Through incentives to reap rewards that could be trade and investment opportunities, states are induced to comply with the stronger party. The third strategy is hedging that is the states’ strategy that is situated between balancing and bandwagoning. It combines, in military and non-military areas, a mixture of bilateral cooperation as well as elements of competition or deterrence towards the greater power (Kuik, 2016, pp. 501-502). The combination of engagement tactics, as Le Hong Hiep (2013, p. 337) elaborates,

Enable states to easily move back and forth along the bandwagoning-balancing continuum, depending on developments in bilateral relations and changes in the international environment. In extreme cases, a state may even quickly switch to pure balancing or bandwagoning strategies without requiring a major overhaul of its foreign and security policies. As such, hedging offers states the much needed flexibility to best deal with their partners’ uncertain future behavior while enabling them to get the most out of the existing relationship.

Southeast Asian states employ the strategy of hedging, albeit having different standings in their leanings towards the two big states (Lim & Cooper, 2015; Shambaugh, 2018). Through the comparative case study methodology on the cases of Vietnam and the Philippines, with information compiled from official papers, governments’ statements, English-language newspapers as well as scholarly literatures, the paper seeks to determine the effects of the new developments in the competition between the two rival powers on the hedging strategy of the two Southeast Asian states. In this paper, firstly and as reference points for comparison,

overviews of Vietnam's and the Philippines' positioning towards and attempts to navigate between the US and China prior to the COVID-19 pandemic will be provided. Secondly, in light of the new phase of the big-power rivalry during the coronavirus outbreak, preliminary observations of the two Southeast Asian states' responses will be elaborated to infer the continuity and changes in the states' positions between the powers.

The Maneuverings of Vietnam

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is inarguably a country strongly shaped by its intense history of dealings with both the United States and China. On the part of the US, the center of the American front in Southeast Asia during the Cold War was the Vietnam War (1955-1975), which initiated the domino theory narrative. The domino theory sees a chain reaction in which one Southeast Asian country's fall under the communist sphere of influence would lead to the whole region being susceptible to follow (Butterly, 2012). Before the victory of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) that unified North Vietnam and South Vietnam in 1975, the American casualties totaled 57,939 members of the armed forces while the estimate Vietnamese deaths ranged from two to three million (Spector, 2020). On the part of Vietnam's neighbor, China, for many centuries Vietnam had been under the direct rule of China (from 3 B.C. to 1000 A.D.). During the Vietnam War, apart from the US and the Soviet Union, China also played a significant role by providing support for the North Vietnamese government. However, the failure in the relationship between the major communist states led to a break down of relations between Vietnam and China as Vietnam turned to the Soviet Union for support. Thus, the feeling of hostility towards China was well evident in Vietnam by the end of the Cold War (Guan, 1998, pp. 1122-1123).

Due to the end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the Soviet Union forced Vietnam to shift its foreign policy direction. Especially under the policy termed *Doi Moi* (or Renovation), Vietnam as a small state with a deteriorating economy implemented a national strategy that comprised three core contents:

- (1) Give highest priority to economic development through socialist-oriented market economic reform, aiming at the society's living standards improvement, national industrialization and modernization, including army modernization



- (2) Continue friendly relations with neighboring countries in Southeast Asia to establish economic partnership and friendly diplomacy
- (3) Improve and strengthen relations with major powers such as the United States, Russia, Japan and especially China, while trying to balance, even prevent that country's ambitions to expand through relations with other powers. (Thanh, 2012, p. 35)

Therefore, according to David Shambaugh (2018, p. 102) among the Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam and Singapore are classified as “balanced hedgers” that pursue extensive relations with both the US and China, but remain cautious in order to maintain and project the balance of influence by the two countries. With the United States, the process of normalization of relations began during the George H. W. Bush administration that included humanitarian assistance to Vietnam and the establishment of US offices in Vietnam. The trade embargo against Vietnam was lifted and the US ended its opposition to the IMF's and World Bank's loans to Vietnam. At the same time, Vietnam allowed American companies to set up offices in the country and cooperated to provide a complete list of missing American soldiers. This led to the official announcement between President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet of the US-Vietnam diplomatic normalization on July 11, 1995 (Siracusa & Nguyen, 2017, pp. 409-410).

Since then, there were continued diplomatic exchanges between the two countries. In the last decade alone, there were several high-level visits of the countries' government leaders. This includes President Barack Obama's visit to Vietnam in 2013 and 2016, President Trump's visits in 2017 and 2019, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to Washington D.C. in 2015 as well as Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc's and Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich's visit in 2017 (Rosenfeld, 2019; Thayer, 2016; Thu, 2017, p. 1). Moreover, the economic relationship between the two countries has expanded since the normalization of relations. While US-Vietnam bilateral trade constituted 450 million dollars in the year 1994, the trade had risen to a staggering 77 billion dollars in 2019 (Samuel, 2020). The bilateral trade has significantly heightened since the signing of a sweeping bilateral trade agreement between the two countries in 2001. Also, due to the US-China trade war, trade with Vietnam grew as Vietnam served as an ideal location for American firms that increasingly shifted operations of supply from China (Hutt, 2020). Moreover, Vietnam had acceded to become a member of the US-led Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade

Organization (WTO) and planned to enter the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) pushed forward by Obama and withdrew from by Trump (Hutt, 2020; *U.S. Relations With Vietnam*, 2020). Additionally, in the Sino-American battle for technological dominance, especially in the looming 5G cellular network competition, Vietnam has maintained a stance siding with the US in avoiding the use of the Chinese Huawei technology. In an interview with the New York Times, the former director of the Institute of Strategic Studies at the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security, Major General Le Van Cough stated that “if a superpower like America regards China as a cybersecurity threat, then of course Vietnam has to” (“Vietnam quietly avoids Huawei,” 2019, para. 11).

Militarily, beginning with the defense ties to recover American ‘missing in action’ (MIA) personnel, security contacts between the two countries grew to include cooperation in search and rescue operations, demining, Vietnamese participation in US Pacific Command conferences, the American lifting of lethal arms sales to Vietnam after Obama’s visit to Hanoi in 2016, and the Vietnamese joining of Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) maritime military exercises hosted by the US in 2018. Also, in 2018, the American Navy aircraft carrier, USS Carl Vinson anchored in Danang. This was the first time an American Navy ship had arrived in Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War (Albert, 2019). As stated by Michael Sullivan (2018, para. 9), “this site is heavy with symbolism. It’s the same port city where U.S. combat troops first landed to support South Vietnam’s fight against the communist north in March 1965.” Importantly, the military connections with the US favored by Vietnam can be accredited to the problem of the South China Sea dispute that will subsequently be elaborated. While significant cooperation between US and Vietnam is evident, a cautious position can be seen from Vietnam. Washington’s concerns over democracy and human rights are the thorn in the side of the relationship, with Vietnam’s suspicions of the US goal to end the VCP monopoly of power (Manyin, 2010). Also, Eleanor Albert (2019, para. 19) states, “lingering Vietnamese distrust of U.S. intentions, a strong sense of independence and nationalism, and concerns over provoking Beijing have restrained Hanoi from swiftly expanding security ties with Washington.”

With China, normalization of relations also began in the year 1991 when the Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen visited Beijing. Since then, high-level meetings between the two countries with similar political ideology have convened at least once annually (Guan, 1998, p. 1123, 1130). Due to Vietnam’s location next to China, as Thanh (2012, p. 34) remarks, “defining appropriate attitudes and behaviors



towards China, handling disagreements between the two countries smoothly to create favorable conditions for the country development has been and will be a big question for the Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam.” On one hand, economically, bilateral trade relations have flourished since the year 1991. China is Vietnam’s largest trading partner and one of the top FDI investors, the fifth largest behind South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan (Onishi, 2020; “Vietnam,” 2019). Also, in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to draw in weaker countries under the promise of financial and technological support for infrastructure projects in order to connect the regional economies and the world. In connection to this, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was also launched by China in 2015. While remaining cautious, Vietnam endorsed both the BRI and the AIIB (Vu, Soong, & Nguyen, 2020; Hiep, 2018; Dollar, 2015). Moreover, as the Trump administration pulled out from the TPP trade agreement in 2017, Vietnam and 10 other members of the TPP reaffirmed their commitment under a now-called Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). While the TPP originally excluded China, in November 2020, President Xi Jinping announced the intent to join the CPTPP. Nevertheless, the realm of the CPTPP remains uncertain as the Chinese accession to the trade agreement is fraught with difficulties and President Biden, who is the former Vice-President that backed the TPP, may move to reenter the US into the pact (Miyake, 2020; Maizland 2021).

In the field of security, apart from the obvious threat from the geographical proximity of rising China, the ongoing maritime South China Sea dispute is a major area of concern for Hanoi. In the South China Sea, Vietnam competes with China over sovereignty claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands as well as over the waters and continental shelf areas east of the Vietnamese coast. While attempts to mitigate conflicts between the two countries have been made such as the holding of party-to-party talks, defense-focused dialogues and an established hotline for South China Sea emergencies, recent aggressive gestures are evident on the part of China (Thu, 2020; Amer, 2014). For example, in 2014, the China National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) set up an oil rig in an area claimed by Vietnam. The incident provoked a near-violent confrontation between Chinese and Vietnamese vessels. Also, when the Philippines (supported by the Vietnamese) initiated an arbitration case and the court ruled against China in 2016, Vietnam’s insecurity heightened as China rejected the ruling. Thus, the action affirms the Vietnamese stance for balanced hedging with the United States (and other countries) (Thu, 2020; Pham & Boudreau, 2014).

As this insecurity continues, a COVID-19 pandemic occurs in which swift responses were made by Vietnam. By 1 February 2020, Vietnam declared a public health emergency and all permits for flights to and from China, Hong Kong, and Macao were halted, one day after the US announced that the country would minimize travel to and from China. Despite its gains from Chinese tourists that accounted to 32.2 percent of the total international arrivals in 2019, the Vietnamese government also announced that they would stop the issuance of foreign visitors' visas for those who had traveled to China in the preceding two weeks. This ban did not include travel from Taiwan ("Vietnam bans all flights," 2020; Liu, 2020; Pham & Murray, 2020). In comparison, Thailand, the first country to confirm a case of coronavirus outside of China on 13 January 2020, in March had only started to signal a 14-day self-quarantine of arrivals from Chinese infected areas (including South Korea, Iran and Italy) (Nguyen & Thanthong-Knight, 2020). The restrictions were imposed although the World Health Organization (WHO) praised the Chinese response to the virus and Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO director-general, stated on 30 January, "The WHO doesn't recommend and actually opposes any restrictions for travel and trade or other measures against China... If anyone is thinking about taking measures, it's going to be wrong" ("China travel bans spread," 2020, para. 8). While Vietnam remained silent as President Trump lambasted China as being accountable for the spread of the pandemic, the Vietnamese presented skepticism of the Chinese handling of the virus. As stated by Nguyen Tien Lap, a former party member of the VCP, "I think both the government and the people of Vietnam have always well understood China and the Chinese government and thus, they never trusted what Chinese leaders had said regarding the pandemic" (Pham & Murray, 2020, para. 10). In fact, in April, the Vietnamese state-backed hacking group APT32 was believed to have attempted to hack into the emails of the staff at China's Ministry of Management and those of the government of Wuhan, the virus center of China (Stubbs & Satter, 2020).

To combat the problem of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is cooperation as well as aid between Vietnam and the two big powers. Through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the US had pledged an aid package worth a total of 9.5 million dollars to Vietnam to cope with the COVID-19 outbreak. The funds include 4.5 million dollars in assistance for the immediate health response needs and another 5 million dollars to support Vietnamese businesses impacted by the outbreak. Additionally, the US gave Vietnam 100 new ventilators needed by the COVID-19 patients ("US grants Viet Nam," 2020; H. Nguyen, 2020).

With China, Vietnam has continuing exchanges. For example, in July 2020, the two countries held the 12th Meeting of the China-Vietnam Steering Committee for Bilateral Cooperation through a video link in which the two parties reaffirmed their cooperation with each other (“The 12th Meeting of the China-Vietnam,” 2020). In September, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated, “China and Vietnam have illustrated their profound ‘comradely and brotherly’ friendship with concrete actions in the joint fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and fully demonstrated the unique advantages of Communist parties’ leadership and the socialist system” (“Joint COVID-19 fight,” 2020, para. 1). China donated COVID-19 prevention and control supplies to Vietnam for aid in the pandemic in May 2020 (“China donates medical supplies,” 2020). On the side of Vietnam, the country has shown cooperative gestures with the two countries. Vietnam expedited the shipments of 450,000 protective suits to the US for which Trump had said thanks to “our friends in Vietnam” (Pearson, 2020, para. 6). Vietnam had donated goods and medical supplies worth 500,000 dollars (and another 100,000 dollars worth from the Vietnam Red Cross) to China in the beginning of the outbreak (An, 2020). Moreover, as the ASEAN chair in 2020, apart from other ASEAN dialogues related to the coronavirus, Vietnam also chaired the Special ASEAN +3 Summit on COVID-19 that included China, Japan and South Korea. It also hosted the ASEAN-United States High-Level Interagency Video Conference on Cooperation to Counter COVID-19. Both were in April 2020 (Tran, 2020).

Amidst the vaccine race, Vietnam did not seem to lean towards either the US or China. The country is in the process of developing its own vaccine to combat the coronavirus. In fact, at the time of this writing, there are four vaccine-development companies in Vietnam of which the NanoCOVAX had begun testing on volunteers in December 2020 (“Vietnam starts human trial,” 2020). In August 2020, Vietnamese state television reported that the government had signed up for the Russian Sputnik V vaccine (P. Nguyen, 2020). This is despite the skepticism about the vaccine on the part of the Americans. For example, at a congressional hearing, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the US infections disease expert stated, “I do hope that the Chinese and the Russians are actually testing the vaccine before they are administering the vaccine to anyone because claims of having a vaccine ready to distribute before you do testing, I think, is problematic at best” (“Russia says it approved,” 2020, para. 14). In the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Leader’s Meeting that took place in August 2020, China also promised Vietnam (along with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand) priority access to its vaccines produced by Chinese companies (Strangio, 2020b). Nevertheless, with the new wave of outbreak in the country, the first COVID-19 vaccine approved

by Vietnam is the AstraZeneca vaccine, based in the UK (Pearson & Vu, 2021). At the same time, Deputy Health Minister Truong Quoc Cuong elaborated that there are still talks to purchase vaccines from the US, Russia, and China (“Vietnam says to buy AstraZeneca,” 2021). Moreover, Vietnam is part of the COVAX initiative to procure vaccines to which Australia had committed a 58 million dollars injection of funds to ensure vaccine access to Southeast Asian and Pacific nations¹ (Strangio, 2020a). The Trump administration had opted out of the program, while the new Biden administration had announced it would support the scheme. China had joined the initiative, albeit its early reluctance, and applied its Chinese vaccine companies to the scheme in late January 2021 (Baker, 2021; Adlakha, 2020; “China to provide 10 million,” 2021).

Apart from the preoccupation in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, the parallel developments in the South China Sea in 2020 are of crucial importance to the Vietnamese struggle between the two powers. In April 2020, China sank a Vietnamese fishing vessel and established two new administrative zones, the Xisha zone on the Paracel Islands and the Nansha zone on the Spratlys under the control of Sansha city, which are areas claimed by Vietnam (Thu, 2020). Vietnam strongly protested against the action as stipulated in a statement by Vietnam’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Le Thi Thu Hang, “the establishment of the so-called Sansha City and related activities seriously violated Vietnam’s sovereignty... Vietnam demands that China respect Vietnam’s sovereignty and abolish its wrongful decisions” (“Vietnam protests Beijing’s expansion,” 2020, para. 4-5). The incidents obviously heightened the Vietnamese sense of mistrust towards China. At the same time, the incident could push Vietnam to lean more towards the United States. Although engrossed in its domestic problems, the US demonstrated a show of strength in a stance against China’s behavior in the South China Sea. For example, in July 2020, the US Navy conducted flight drills of its two aircraft carriers and dispatched four other warships to the South China Sea, the largest fleet deployment in the area in recent years (Bonji, 2020). Furthermore, Washington raised its tone towards China as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a statement to denounce the Chinese action. He stated, “any [People’s Republic of China] action to harass other states’ fishing or hydrocarbon development in these waters – or to carry out such activities unilaterally – is unlawful... The world will not allow Beijing to treat

¹ COVAX is a United Nations-backed initiative co-led by Gavi, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and WHO to ensure equal access to the COVID-19 vaccines.



the South China Sea as its maritime empire” (“South China Sea dispute,” 2020, para. 12-13). While there were doubts about the maintenance of the American stance with the change of administration, soon after Biden took office, the US government sent signals against the Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea area. This includes the State Department’s communication with the Philippine Foreign Minister in which Secretary of State Antony Blinken “underscored that the United States rejects China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea to the extent they exceed the maritime zones that China is permitted to claim under international law” (“In multiple messages,” 2021, para. 6).

The Maneuverings of the Philippines

In the post-Cold War period, swings between discordant and agreeable relations loomed between the Philippines and the two big powers. With the United States, the relations had been solidified in the form of colonizer and colony. And, after the independence of the Philippines, the Treaty of General Relations was signed with note of “the desire to cement the relations of close and long friendship existing between the two countries” (McNutt & Roxas, 1946). In the Cold War context, the Philippines served as logistic bedrock for the American forces during the Korean War and, more so, the Vietnam War in which the country hosted the US largest overseas bases in Clark Field and Subic Bay. However, the relations changed after the US exited the bases in 1991 and 1992, which coincided with the end of the Cold War (Heydarian, 2017a, p. 573; Oberdorfer, 1991). The relations between the two ebbed and flowed as the Philippines differently situated itself in the international arena, especially in its engagements with China.

With China, the first normalization of relations began during the period of the Cold War’s détente in the 1970s, in line with the American policy approach to engage with China. Then, after the Cold War, the Chinese assertive gestures into the disputed Spratly Islands in 1994 revived the US-Philippine alliance. Then, cooperation with the US was buttressed during the war against terrorism after the 9/11 incident. However, with the stagnant war on terror and the Filipino public clamor against the Philippines’ military support of the US invasion of Iraq, President Gloria Arroyo withdrew the Philippines from the US-led mission of the “Coalition of the Willing” in Iraq and this soured the US-Philippine relations (de Castro, 2009; Heydarian, 2017a). Parallel with the Chinese accession to the WTO in 2001 and its rise to become a regional economic power, the Philippines began to intensely engage with China. According to Heydarian (2017a, p. 575),

The Arroyo administration astutely employed the “China card,” embarking on a high-profile state visit to Beijing, which culminated in a series of trade, security, and investment agreements. What followed was arguably the “golden age” of Philippines-China relations, as the Arroyo administration secured major Chinese investments for the country, particularly in the infrastructure sector, and explored CBMs such as the 2004 Joint Maritime Seismic Undertaking (JMSU) to manage disputes and explore joint development schemes in the SCS.

Nevertheless, scandals brought upon the Arroyo administration related to corruption in the Philippine-China joint ventures led to a change of government with a new administration under the leadership of President Benigno Aquino III. This came along with another shift in the Filipino approaches that were more towards the US and away from China (Theophilus, 2007). Aquino’s government, with its overt posture against corruption, was less inclined towards Chinese investments in the country (Heydarian, 2017a). Also, in 2012, serious friction reemerged in the South China Sea with augmented Chinese naval presence in the area of Scarborough Shoal, which led to a military standoff between China and the Philippines (Branigan & Watts, 2012). By 2013, the Philippines took the case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in which China refused to participate (Wiegand & Beuck, 2020, p. 144). The insecurity with the regional power therefore steered the Philippines to embrace the United States, especially as the US pointed its direction to the region under Obama’s ‘Pivot to Asia’. In 2014, President Obama and President Aquino signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) that would allow, albeit not a permanent establishment of military bases, US planes and troops’ rotating presence in the Philippines. Through this act, Xinhua, the Chinese state-backed newspaper printed a piece that called the Philippines a “troublemaker in the South China Sea” (Rauhala, 2014, para. 5).

In line with the state’s trend of oscillating between the US and China, the administration under Rodrigo Roa Duterte (2016-present) imposed a forceful reversal in the country’s foreign policy towards the global titans. While the Aquino administration prioritized the geopolitical security of the country, the new populist president favored the economic and development gains that China had to offer. According to Renato Cruz de Castro (2018, p. 169),



The failings in the domestic economy during the Aquino Administration helped Mr. Duterte win his 2016 presidential bid. During President Aquino's watch, the public-private partnership in infrastructure projects languished, public transportation was neglected, and traffic in urban centers worsened. Amid economic woes and unfulfilled reforms and infrastructure plans, Mr. Duterte called for a "real change" (*Tuna an Pagbabago*).

The United States was and remains one of the Philippines' top trading partners and hosts of the country's FDI ("Foreign Trade Statistics of the Philippines," 2016; "Philippine Foreign Trade in Figures," 2021; *Foreign Investments: Fourth Quarter, 2016*; "Philippines (The): Foreign Investment," 2021). However, the Obama administration pressed concerns on Duterte's human rights abuses. For instance, when Duterte won the election, along with the congratulatory message from Obama, the US president also focused on the assurance to maintain democracy, human rights, and the rule of law ("Readout of the President's", 2016). Nevertheless, Duterte, in regard to the handling of drugs and crimes, incurred wide allegations by human rights organizations during his leadership in Davao City as well as the methods he vowed to maintain in his presidential campaign and conducted during his presidency. In his last presidential campaign speech, he declared, "forget the laws of human rights... If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just what I did as mayor. You drug pushers, hold-up men and do-nothings, you better go out. Because as the mayor, I'd kill you" (Gutierrez, Ap, & Sawatzky, 2016, para. 15). By September 2016, when Duterte's drug war was underway, the Filipino President's answered to a reporter who asked his potential response to President Obama's potential questioning of his methods in an upcoming conference, he said, "You must be respectful. Do not just throw away question and statements. Son of a whore, I will curse you in that forum" ("Philippines President Duterte curses," 2016, para. 8). The US-Philippine ties were slightly amended during the Trump administration as Trump brushed aside the human rights concerns in the Philippines and commended President Duterte's efforts in his war on drugs. Nevertheless, Duterte still declined Trump's invitation to Washington in 2016 as well as in January 2020 for the US-ASEAN summit in Nevada ("Trump praises Duterte," 2017; Persio, 2017; Lopez, 2020).

On the other hand, in the pre-pandemic period under Duterte, the Philippines evidently forged close ties with China. In fact, Beijing was the President's chosen location for his first major state visit and he visited four times after that (Heydarian, 2017b, p. 220; "For the 5th time," 2019). According to de Castro (2018, pp. 178-179),

During the first meeting, presidents Xi Jinping and Duterte discussed enhancing practical bilateral cooperation. Specifically, President Xi asked President Duterte to coordinate their development strategies and cooperate with each other within the framework of the BRI. Both leaders issued a joint communique that laid down areas for comprehensive cooperation and signed memorandums of cooperation in thirteen areas, including economics and trade, investment, financing, and construction of infrastructure. The total amount of money committed by China to boost economic cooperation between the two countries was US\$13.5 billion, of which US\$9 billion was allocated for Philippine infrastructure development.

Moreover, while the Philippines leaned towards China and the Belt Road Initiative, it did not join the Obama-led TPP although it did present its consideration of the agreement (Ranada, 2016). Also, within the 5G race, the Philippines' telecom service provider, Globe Telecom Inc. launched its 5G broadband service through the employment of internet infrastructures provided by the Chinese Huawei Technologies in June 2019 (Morales, 2019).

In the issue of the South China Sea, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled in favor of the Philippines in 2016. The Court established that the Chinese 'nine-dash line' claim over the area is not valid under the UNCLOS, and the Mischief Reef and the Second Thomas Shoal are within the jurisdiction of the Philippines. Overall, the ruling significantly reduced the Chinese maritime rights in the Spratly Island and Scarborough Shoal as well as determined that the waters in the South China Sea outside of 12-nautical-miles from the islands are open to all states. China immediately rejected the legitimacy of the ruling and refused to comply with it (Zhang, 2017; Philips, Holmes, & Bowcott, 2016). Notwithstanding the beneficial result, President Duterte had played down the victory. In December 2016, the President stated to the public, "in the play of politics, now, I will set aside the arbitral ruling. I will not impose anything on China" ("Philippines to 'set aside,'" 2016, para. 2). Additionally, in the 30th ASEAN Summit chaired by the Philippines, Duterte fended off discussions with regards to the South China Sea despite China's island building and weapons deployments on the reclaimed land features (de Castro, 2018, p. 180). As noted by Cal Wong (2017, para. 4), Duterte mentioned that apart from the expectations on the progress of the Code of Conduct, the issue of the South China Sea was not raised among the ASEAN leaders. Moreover Duterte said "any discussion about the fortification of reclaimed islands in the South China Sea by China was useless, and that he did not seek any 'trouble' with China." As of this writing, the Code of Conduct (COC) has not been finalized.



In this connection, the US-Philippine security ties dwindled. Since the first year of Duterte's term, while the military pact with the US is maintained, under the Philippines' new administration the focus of the alliance has shifted. As de Castro (2018, p. 173) remarks, "the continued existence of the Philippine-U.S. alliance would revolve around the Duterte Administration's war on drugs, Humanitarian Assistance and Risk Reduction (HADR), and counter-terrorism operations against Islamic militants in Mindanao." At the same time, in September 2016, Duterte also urged the withdrawal of American Special Forces from Mindanao. With regards to the security in the South China Sea, Duterte curbed Philippine cooperation with the US to avoid antagonizing Beijing. For instance, the access to the Philippines' bases for the US to launch Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea was canceled. Any naval joint patrols with the US and exercises in the area were suspended (Regencia, 2016; Moss, 2016). Furthermore, in the beginning of 2020, Filipino Senator Ronald Dela Rosa's US visa was invalidated with the suspected cause being due to his involvement in the extrajudicial killings during Duterte's war on drugs. Consequently, President Duterte pursued the termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) signed in 1998 and the government showed intentions to end the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) signed in 1951 as well as the EDCA signed by President Aquino (Santos, 2020a; Santos, 2020b).

In the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the first case of the coronavirus in the Philippines was reported on 30 January and the case of local infection was recorded on 6 March 2020 ("Philippines confirms first case," 2020; Dancel, 2020a). On 2 February, the Philippines enforced a temporary ban on visitors from China, Hong Kong, and Macao ("Philippines issues temporary," 2020). At the same time, Duterte publicly warned the public against the anti-Chinese sentiments. That was because the spread of the virus aroused the attention of the public, especially those who had been skeptical of Duterte's leanings towards China and who now urged earlier closure of borders (Cook, 2020). In a briefing on 3 February, Duterte played down the virus by stating that "everything is well in the country. There's nothing really to be extra scared of that coronavirus thing." Moreover, Duterte explicitly stated that "China has been kind to us, we can only show the same favor to them. Stop this sinophobia thing... It happened in China, at least the first, but that is not the fault of anybody. Not of the Chinese. Not of the Filipinos" (Tolentino, 2020, para. 1, 6). Although, by mid-March when the Philippines encountered one of the worst virus outbreaks in Southeast Asia, the President imposed a strict lockdown and an order to the police and military to shoot anyone who would fight the

measures (“‘Shoot them dead,’” 2020). Then, as President Trump fired at the WHO for being China-centric and announced the freezing of funds to the organization, Duterte proclaimed, “the Philippines is willing to continue to strengthen cooperation with China and the WHO” (Choi & Wheaton, 2020; “Xi, Duterte hail,” 2020, para. 11).

With regards to aid, the Philippines has received various kinds of assistance from both of the two powers. From the US, the Philippines acquired almost 10 million dollars to assist the country’s COVID-19 response. The aid was for the support of medical front liners, laboratory and specimen transport systems, case-finding, disease surveillance as well as prevention control efforts. During the phone call that resulted in a part of the US donation in April 2020, Trump and Duterte agreed to continue their bilateral cooperation to “defeat the [coronavirus] pandemic, save lives, and restore global economic strength” (Cator, 2020, para. 7). With China, in a press briefing in March, Duterte informed the public that “President Xi Jinping, for all his goodness to us, wrote me a letter and he is willing to help. All we have to do is to ask” (“Duterte says China willing to help,” 2020, para. 1). Through the first year of the coronavirus outbreak, China had provided equipment and assistance to the country. This included cash aid, ventilators, test kits, masks, PPE sets, goggles, face shields as well as a team of medical experts to the country and had also launched the Hua-Yan Molecular and Diagnostic Pathology Laboratory in Pampanga (“China donates P1-million,” 2020). Although in March, the Philippines’ Health Department revealed that the test kits provided by China were ineffective with low accuracy in the readings. This statement was soon retracted with the Department’s statement to clarify that through parallel testing, the kits were in fact at par with the kits provided by the WHO and offered an apology (“DOH clarifies: COVID-19 test kits,” 2020). The Philippines also sent aid to China at the onset of the pandemic. In January, the government donated 1.4 million dollars worth of masks to Wuhan and sold 3.6 million masks to China (Valenzuela, 2020). The Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teddy Locsin Jr. also tweeted on 7 February 2020, “when our plane goes to Hubei to evacuate Filipinos who want to leave, the plane will be loaded with food items, masks if we find any, everything. And DFA will pay for it because I don’t give a shit about audit procedures in this case. China helps us we help China. I have spoken” (Cook, 2020, para. 9). This was amid criticisms that the government was unable to distribute protective gears for its vulnerable population to prevent the likely virus upsurge (Valenzuela, 2020).

With the arrival of the COVID-19 vaccine, the Philippines’ leadership had placed high importance to its acquisition, as the country was hit hard by the pandemic. In truth, the government had declared that it was ready to sell its assets to purchase



vaccine doses for its population (“Philippines ready to sell assets,” 2020). China was the first country approached by the President to procure the supplies. In the President’s State of the Nation Address on 27 July 2020, Duterte stated, “four days ago I made a plea to President Xi Jinping that if they have the vaccine, can they allow us to be one of the first- or if it’s needed that we will have to buy it – that we will be granted credit so we can normalize as fast as possible” (Tomacruz, 2020b, para. 3). Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin responded three days later, “The Philippines is a friendly close neighbor and we will give priority to its needs once we succeed in developing a vaccine” (Tomacruz, 2020a, para. 2). Although, the Philippines did not receive the Chinese vaccine in the year 2020 as Indonesia was the first country, being a test site, that received the Chinese Sinovac vaccine that year. The first batch of vaccine to be delivered to the Philippines were Pfizer’s and BioNTech’s vaccines through the COVAX facility (“Indonesia receives first,” 2020; Tomacruz, 2021). Nevertheless, Duterte had commented that China as well as Russia had not demand upfront payments in contrast to western companies that required cash advances for stock reservations (Jiao & Sayson, 2020). While the Chinese vaccine came under scrutiny after tests in Brazil had shown questionable results in its efficacy, on January 2021, Duterte defended the procurement of 25 million doses of Chinese Sinovac in his television address that “the Chinese are not lacking in brains... The Chinese are bright. They would not venture (into producing vaccines) if it is not safe, sure and secure” (“Philippines’ Duterte defends,” 2021, para. 2). Additionally, to secure the vaccines to inoculate at least 60 to 70 percent of the population, the Philippine government is pursuing negotiations with many other vaccine companies including: American Moderna, Pfizer, and Johnson & Johnson; Serum Institute of India; British AstraZeneca; and Russian Gamaleya Institute (“Philippines signs deals,” 2021). With the US, it is reported that the Philippine President used the VFA agreement as leverage to obtain the Pfizer vaccines. As the VFA termination had been postponed, to acquire the vaccines, the President had said in a televised cabinet meeting in relations to the VFA that “if they fail to deliver a minimum of 20 million vaccines, they better get out – no vaccine, no stay here” (Venzon, 2020, para. 3). At the time of this writing, the negotiations have advanced but are still ongoing (Ramos, 2021).

Notwithstanding the fact that the Philippines’ leanings towards China are evident, with the change in the playing field ushered in by the global pandemic, China’s ability to pull the Philippines from the US sphere has faced a three-pronged assault. Firstly, as aforementioned, the stalling of the VFA cancellation was in part

used as a bargaining chip for the Philippines to secure the vaccine against the virus. Secondly, while China had committed billions of dollars to investments and constructions of infrastructure, the projects had either been shelved in the process of further negotiations or were slow to be implemented (de Castro, 2018; Valenzuela, 2020). Significantly, along with the deteriorating Philippine economy, the states' preoccupation with the handling of the pandemic further delayed the promised developments to be gained from the turn towards China. As elaborated in Magtulis and Cigural's (2020, para. 8) report, "the delay in meetings held quarterly to speed up development aid disbursement would entangle more than P300 billion in Chinese infrastructure funding under the "Build, Build, Build" program. Beyond the boardrooms, contractors are likewise bracing for project disruptions as the supply of raw materials like steel, of which China is a big exporter, begin to get depleted." Thirdly, by China's own-doings, the Chinese assertive moves in the South China Sea forced the Philippines into the confrontation in the dispute. Apart from the sinking of the Vietnamese fishing vessels and the creation of two new administrative zones, beginning in February 2020, there was a naval standoff between China and the Philippines after a Peoples' Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ship aimed its gun control direction towards a Philippine anti-submarine vessel in the Spratly Islands (de Castro, 2020). When China scheduled maritime drills, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana concurred with Vietnam's concern in the issue and commented, "that is very concerning, we view that with alarm... Doing it in the contested areas then that will, you know, sound the alarm bells for all the claimants" (Nguyen & Morales, 2020, para. 8). In the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) taking place in September 2020, after years of silence on the ruling, Duterte affirmed the 2016 arbitral ruling. In his speech presented in the assembly, the President stated,

The Philippines affirms that commitment in the South China Sea in accordance with the UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Award. The award is now part of international law, beyond compromise and beyond the reach of passing governments to dilute, diminish or abandon... We welcome the increasing number of states that have come in support of the award and what it stands for the triumph of reason over rashness, of law over disorder, of amity over ambition. This, as it should, is the majesty of the law. (Yumol, 2020, para. 2-4)



The turn of events during the COVID-19 pandemic therefore reopened avenues of engagement between the US and the Philippines. As observed by Peter Mumford, the President is “hedging his bets more at a time when he wants to keep several options open for access to vaccine and the Philippines is coming under more pressure from China in the South China Sea” (“Duterte gets tough,” 2020, para. 12). A more conciliatory gesture was signaled by the Philippines as a US Marine imprisoned for the killing of a transgender Filipino was granted an absolute pardon in September 2020. This was despite the condemnation by the human rights group, Karapatan, that the pardon is a “despicable and shameless mockery of justice and servility to US imperial interests” (“Philippines pardons US Marine,” 2020, para. 3). Also, with regards to the extended VFA, the intent to continue the security alliance is depicted in Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Locsin’s statement that, “we look forward to continuing our strong military partnership with the United States, even as we continue to reach out to our regional allies in building a common defense towards enduring stability, peace and continuing economic progress and prosperity in our part of the world” (Lendon, 2020, para. 20). At the same time, a reserved stance can still be seen, for example, the Philippines refused to sanction Chinese firms involved in the building and militarizing the islands in the South China Sea that are blacklisted by the US (Morales, 2020). Nevertheless, as confrontation with China continued into the year 2021, the forging of stronger security ties with the US is possible, especially when the US had displayed a tougher stance in the South China Sea. By the end of January 2021, China had passed a new law that allows the Chinese coast guard to fire at other states’ vessels and to demolish structures on the Chinese claims in the South China Sea. In reaction, Foreign Secretary Locsin had filed a diplomatic protest (Robles, 2021). Also, although Duterte is skeptical towards the Biden presidency and had outwardly stated that he preferred Trump, he has stated, the government is “committed to further enhancing the relations with the United States under the Biden administration” in his congratulatory message (Dancel, 2020b, para. 3). In response to the latest row, on 27 January 2021, as aforementioned in the section on Vietnam, the new Secretary of State Antony Blinken contacted Locsin to reaffirm the American stand with the Southeast Asian claimant states (“In multiple messages,” 2021).

Discussion

From the observations presented in this paper, the strategy of hedging which combines the tactics of engaging in relations as well as counteracting gestures in varying degrees remain the prominent strategy employed by the Southeast Asian states. As smaller states in the region that is stuck between the two pulls of the rival big powers and in the midst of the changing dynamics and uncertain future posed by the COVID-19 outbreak, the hedging strategy allows for the needed flexibility to ensure the survival and benefits in both military and non-military domains. Nevertheless, as the aforementioned explanation of the hedging tactics elucidates, the strategy comprises of the states moving back and forth along the continuum closer or further away from the dominant powers. In the case of Vietnam and the Philippines, the threats posed during the COVID-19 pandemic affected the states positioning further away from China and closer to the United States. This is especially, for both Vietnam and the Philippines, under the condition of heightened traditional security threat projected from China in the area of the South China Sea that became more aggressive during the coronavirus outbreak.

In the case of Vietnam, the state has historical animosity with both the US and China as well as an ideological difference with the US and a threatening geographical proximity to China. Therefore, since the normalization of relations with the two big powers in the 1990s, the state pursued a hedging strategy of trying to maintain a middle ground between the two powers. Vietnam maintained limited security ties with the United States but has diplomatic and economic engagements with both countries. With extensive economic ties to China, Vietnam tried to avoid being consumed into China's orbit while the country has maintained distance with the US, in order to avert the frustration of the big neighbor.

Continuity of the Vietnamese hedging strategy to cautiously embrace and withstand the influence of both powers can be seen in the period of the pandemic. In aid cooperation to alleviate the needs to overcome the pandemic, Vietnam received and sent assistance to both the US and China while, as the ASEAN chair, engaged both countries in high-level special meetings to counter COVID-19. In light of the global vaccine race, although the country currently is in talks to purchase vaccines from many countries, including the US and China, Vietnam had decided to initially choose to develop its own vaccine, sign up for the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, and procure vaccines from the COVAX program.



Nevertheless, the traditional and non-traditional threat posed upon the country by the novel virus crisis led the country to present more signals of movement against China and towards the US. For instance, Vietnam had displayed a position that is skeptical to the positive affirmation of China's management and response to the virus. Importantly, when China became more assertive in the South China Sea as the regional actors were distracted by the pandemic, a strong protest was launched by Vietnam. This also coincided with the Trump administration's assurance to counteract China in its claim in the disputed area, which has since been reiterated by the Biden administration.

As to the Philippines, this country had been inclined towards the US and China in different periods. While the relations between the US and the Philippines were cemented after the Philippines' independence and during the Cold War, ties with the US has ebbed and flowed with stronger ties in 1994 against China in the South China Sea, in the early cooperation in the war against terror in the early 2000s, and again during the administration of Benigno Aquino III. Up to the period before the COVID-19 outbreak, there were intervals of strained relations with the US in which leanings towards Beijing were prominent as in the Arroyo administration and especially under the administration of Rodrigo Duterte. Under Duterte, although economic ties with the US remained, there was clear motion to bandwagon with China, especially in the interest of enjoying the economic and investment gains the regional power had to offer. This was made more emphatic by the administration's contention with the US on human rights issues. In the bandwagoning effort, the existing security ties with the US were underway to being dismantled.

Notwithstanding, with the new phase of threat and impact posed by the coronavirus pandemic, the pre-virus position of the Philippines also shows signs of shifting and are reeled back towards a more balanced hedging strategy. Although the Philippine administration showed outward preference for China such as in the expression of support for China amid the American-led demands for Chinese accountability and condemnation for mishandling of the outbreak, the Philippines welcomed assistance from both China and the US. Additionally, to procure vaccines that are deemed as high priority by the Philippines' President, the cancellation of the military pact with the US was halted. Apart from the further stagnation of economic benefits to be gained from moving towards bandwagoning with China, as in the case of Vietnam, there is an increasing and ongoing security challenge posed by China in the South China Sea. In response to this, the Philippines affirmed

the 2016 arbitration award that had been muted. Furthermore, security relations with the US, now far from termination, are deemed to be growing as the US under Trump as well as Biden is displaying gestures in support of the Southeast Asian claimant states.

The obvious limitation to the findings is the fact that the COVID-19 outbreak is still ravishing the region and the dynamics of the power play caused by the virus are yet conclusive. However, with the presented observations, hedging strategy will remain the core strategy of the Southeast Asian states. In the case of Vietnam, albeit the leanings away from China in resultant to the threat posed during the COVID-19 crisis, the geographical proximity to China is a physical constraint that forces Vietnam to maintain cautious relations with both the powers. In the case of the Philippines, as the overview suggests, the country tends to oscillate between the US and China depending on different circumstances. With the continued prospect of uncertainty from the virus and presence of threat in the South China Sea, the tendency to balance the relations with the two powers and the pull to the US especially for security will also remain. This can be concluded from the reversal of stance by Duterte, the evidently most pro-Chinese leader of the Philippines.

Conclusion

The big-power rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China has become increasingly intense in the past decade with Southeast Asia serving as a significant arena in the competition. Notably, the rivalry is exacerbated by the global coronavirus pandemic that is now rolling through Southeast Asia and, in the new avenues of competition, making the various countries more or less dependent on these superpowers for the presumed expertise, supplies, and economic aid. Thus, the paper examines the effects of the new developments in the competition between the US and China on the hedging strategy of Vietnam and the Philippines. Through the preliminary observations in the cases of Vietnam and the Philippines, although the acts of hedging remain, the recent phase of the contention has launched changes in those states' positions between the two big powers.

To determine the changes in the hedging strategy of the two states during the recent phase of the big-power contention, the comparative methodology is employed on the case studies of Vietnam and the Philippines to see the differences between the countries' positionings before and after virus outbreak. The overviews



of the two Southeast Asian states illustrate that, prior to the pandemic, Vietnam was considered to be a balanced hedger between the United States and China. Security ties, albeit limited, were grasped towards the United States while economic ties with China were also enhanced in the recent decades. On the side of the Philippines, under the current administration of Rodrigo Duterte, the country was leaning towards bandwagoning with China and was in the process of cutting ties with the US. Then, as the world was consumed by the COVID-19 crisis, although Vietnam continued its engagements with both countries, the state gestured skepticism towards China's management of the virus outbreak and vaccine development. And, although Philippines projected confidence in the Chinese capability to handle to crisis, the situation of the pandemic also led to the maintenance of relations with the US to procure aids and vaccines. Significantly, the Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea during the period of the virus emergency as well strengthened the two Southeast Asian states' security ties with the United States.

From this study, further research in the direction of observation and understanding of the Southeast Asian states' hedging strategy can be pursued. This is especially in light of the other Southeast Asian states that do not encounter the same prominent security threat from China in the South China Sea as are faced by Vietnam and the Philippines. Moreover, with the changes in the hedging strategy caused by the pandemic as seen in the two Southeast Asian states' positioning, the implications on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) amidst the pulls of the rival superpowers can be further elucidated.

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