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**A COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF PHILIPPINE AND VIETNAM STRATEGIES
IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

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Biographical Sketch

Rex Marion C. Laguerta has a degree in political science and a graduate certificate in ASEAN Studies. He currently works as an administrative assistant in a regional hospital in Pangasinan. His research interests include Southeast Asian geopolitics and governance.

Abstract

This study examines the interactions of intra-Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) actors, their strategies, and actions, and offers a conceptual framework to explain current attempts at territorial contestation in the South China Sea (SCS). The conceptual framework attempts to apply a multidimensional management framework to the SCS claims by ASEAN and China. Vietnam has effectively used the multidimensional management framework in its strategies in the SCS and offers valuable lessons to other ASEAN co-claimants, including the Philippines.

The strategies of both Vietnam and the Philippines manifest state-to-state channels of interaction. The correspondence between Vietnam's strategy to the rest of the ASEAN member states indicates the deployment of supra-state-to-state level of interactions.

Positive and negative factors interact in the ASEAN Way of Conflict Management as shown by the Vietnamese experience. It is imperative for the ASEAN to strengthen its dispute settlement mechanisms while strengthening the rules-based order based on member states' interests. An in-depth comparison of Philippine and Vietnamese SCS strategies has shown a strong basis for cooperation in harnessing the SCS energy and marine resources. In 2016, the arbitral tribunal adjudicating the Philippines' case against China in the SCS ruled overwhelmingly in favor of the Philippines. In contrast, Vietnam used hedging tactics. These actions indicate a diversity in strategies for smaller countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines to counterbalance pressure from big countries.

Future studies should be able to fine-tune the use of mixed quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the impact of SCS strategies on possible concerted synergized actions. Joint strategies should strengthen and mutually reinforce naval

defense capabilities or management of fisheries and marine resources. These potential areas of cooperation based on mutual interest are barely addressed in the literature.

The Philippines can develop a more robust strategy and management framework to support the independent foreign policy articulated by the Philippine administrations. The Philippine SCS strategy should be able to protect and assert its sovereignty and national interest, over and beyond the pressures of Sino-American bipolarism.

Keywords: ASEANology, ASEAN way in the SCS conflict, multilateralism

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
University Permission Page	iii
Acceptance Page	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Biographical Sketch	vi
Abstract	vii
Table of Contents	viii
List of Figures	x
List of Tables	x
List of Acronyms	xi
 CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION	 1
A. Background of the Study	2
B. Research Problem	4
C. Research Objectives	5
D. Significance of the Study	6
E. Limitations of the Study	7
F. Theoretical Framework	8
1. Mahiwo's Meta-Nation State Paradigm	9
2. ASEANology through the Meta-Nation State Paradigm	10
G. Conceptual Framework	12
H. Operational Definition of Terms	15
 CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE	 17
A. The Vietnamese SCS Position	17
B. Characterizing Vietnamese SCS Strategies	20
C. Vietnam's Energy Security Concerns as Game Changer	23
D. Vietnam Outlook as a Regional Leader	25
E. Vietnam's Commitment to Multilateralism	30
F. Comparison with an ASEAN Peer Co-Claimant	36
G. Toward Formation of an SCS International Order	40
H. ASEAN and the SCS Conflict Management: Capacity, Capability, and Competency	45
I. Assessing the Implications of the Vietnamese and Philippines SCS Strategies in Relation to the ASEAN WOCM	48
 CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY	 50
A. Research Design	50
B. Theorizing and Data Analysis in Qualitative Research	50
C. Research Instrument	53
D. Sampling Method	53
E. Procedures for Data Collection	54
F. Procedures for Data Analysis	54
G. Ethical Considerations	57

CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS	58
A. Presentation of Data	58
1. Vietnamese Strategies	61
2. Comparison between the Vietnamese and Philippines SCS Strategies	74
3. Implications of ASEAN WOCM for the Vietnamese and Philippine SCS Strategies and vice versa	82
B. Analysis of Data	96
1. Vietnamese Strategies	96
2. Comparison between the Vietnamese and Philippines SCS Strategies	113
3. Implications of ASEAN WOCM-Vietnamese and Philippine SCS Strategies and vice versa	122
C. Summary	147
D. Discussion of Findings	147
1. Research Question No. 1: Vietnamese Strategies	148
2. Research Question No. 2: Comparison between the Vietnamese and Philippines SCS Strategies	150
3. Research Question No. 3: Implications of ASEAN WOCM-Vietnamese and Philippine SCS Strategies and vice versa	152
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION	159
A. Conclusions	159
B. Implications of the Study	161
C. Recommendations	164
1. Theoretical	164
2. Methodological	164
3. Policy	165
REFERENCES	167
APPENDICES	175
Appendix A: Research Instrument for Key Informant 1	175
Appendix B: Research Instrument for Key Informant 2	176
Appendix C: Research Instrument for Key Informant 3	177
Appendix D: Revised Thematic Map	178
Appendix E: Initial Thematic Map	179

List of Figures

Figure 1 Theoretical framework	9
Figure 2 Conceptual framework	12
Figure 3 Functions of mediation	42
Figure 4 Final thematic map	59
Figure 5 Major themes across the sample	60

List of Tables

Table 1 Thematic coding sub-themes under the theme Vietnamese SCS Strategies	61
Table 2 Interview sub-themes under the theme Vietnamese SCS Strategies	70
Table 3 Thematic coding sub-themes under the theme Philippine SCS Strategies	74
Table 4 Interview sub-themes under the theme Philippine SCS Strategies	79
Table 5 Thematic coding sub-themes under the theme ASEAN SCS Strategies	82
Table 6 Interview sub-themes under the theme ASEAN SCS Strategies	87
Table 7 Thematic coding sub-themes under the theme External Entities' SCS Strategies	89
Table 8 Interview sub-themes under the theme External Entities' SCS Strategies	95
Table 9 Correspondence of Research Questions and Findings	156

List of Acronyms

ADMM – ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting
ADMM Plus – ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting Plus
AMM – ASEAN Ministerial Meeting
AOIP – ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
APEC – Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF – ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN – Association of South East Asian Nations
ASEAN Plus – Association of South East Asian Nations Plus
ASEM – Asia-Europe Meeting
BRI – Belt and Road Initiative
CCD – Community of Common Destiny
CDS – Comprehensive Development Strategy
COC – Code of Conduct
CPV – Communist Party of Vietnam
DOC – Declaration of Conduct
EAS – East Asian Summit
EEZ – Exclusive Economic Zone
EU – European Union
FONOP – Freedom of Navigation Operations
FDI – Foreign Direct Investment
FTA – Free Trade Agreement
GDP – Gross Domestic Product
IMF – International Monetary Fund
JSMU – Joint Seismic Mutual Undertaking
QDA – Qualitative Data Analysis
QUAD – Quadrilateral Security Strategy
PCA – Permanent Court of Arbitration
SEATO – South East Asian Treaty Organization
SCS – South China Sea
UOA – Unit of Analysis
UN – United Nations
UNCLOS – United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas
US – United States of America
USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WB – World Bank
WOCM – Way of Conflict Management

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to understand the impact of the strategies implemented by Vietnam and the Philippines in the context of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Way of Conflict Management (WOCM) in approaching the management of the South China Sea (SCS) dispute. Drawn from primary sources (e.g. interviews of key informants) as well as secondary sources (e.g. scholarly articles), this Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) study aims to assess the direction taken by Vietnamese SCS strategies, how they fared as compared with the peer co-claimant, Philippines' tactics, and the implications of these strategies to the ASEAN WOCM. It is anticipated that this research will generate information that would broaden the perspectives on the Vietnamese and Philippine domestic systems and the ASEAN regionalization on the geopolitical conflict and related policymaking, and ultimately the formulation of the SCS Code of Conduct (COC), which finalization is yet to be seen. This study employs thematic analysis to allow the emergence of prevailing themes regarding the topic and content analysis to triangulate the result and shape responses to the research questions.

This chapter starts with a background of the study as well as contains the research problem, the research objectives, significance, and limitations of the study. Likewise included are the research design, research instrument, sampling method, data collection, and procedures for data analysis which are discussed in the latter part of this chapter.

Background of the Study

Divergent claims in the SCS have gained attention as a “hot spot” in international relations, and contemporary scholarship has likewise focused on its impact on international relations. The maritime territory in contest—a vital naval route and airspace as well as a marine-bounty-and-natural-resources-abundant waterscape—is claimed by six states from East and Southeast Asia: the People’s Republic of China, Republic of China (Taiwan), Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Ascending as a world economic superpower, China solidifies its aggressive expansionism in the contested territory, to which the United States (US) has been responding with consolidating support from allies in the Indo-Pacific region and securing commitment by the other co-claimants to counterbalance against their neighbor in the north.

Making the phenomenon more interesting is the divisive view on the efficacy of the ASEAN to negotiate an executory resolution, let alone a unified stance among its membership, toward the territorial competition. This organizational deadlock has left ASEAN member state co-claimants on their own to navigate securing their sovereign assets in the Chinese hegemony-dominated turbulent waters (Limaye, 2018). As a result, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Vietnam thereafter) stands as the lone activist against Chinese intrusion in the controversial waterway among the Southeast Asian parties to the SCS dispute (Emmers and Huong, 2020).

Recent developments attest to the centrality of the Vietnamese SCS case in the maritime conflict. Its ongoing rise as an emerging middle power in the Indo-Pacific macro-sphere has been observed in various literature. Being the Southeast Asian country with the largest claims over the SCS, Vietnam has assumed leadership in engaging China in line with the territorial issue. It has developed hedging strategies to

keep China in check in its assertion in the contested seas. The ASEAN member state (AMS) maximizes its position in formal and informal venues to leverage not only its own but also its Southeast Asian peers' interest in the dispute. Its instances of rebuffing Chinese military elements from its territory have been well-documented. Even during the coronavirus pandemic, Hanoi has postured escape from China's orbit of influence by recording impressive economic growth as well as producing its own vaccine. The Southeast Asian country is seen to be a rising "swing state" or a "bridge" in the geopolitical entanglement played by hegemons, laying in the open its blue economy ambitions which are heavily centered on the Vietnamese control of its contended portions in the SCS (Emmers and Huong, 2020; Le, 2021; Thayer, 2011; 2016; Thuong and Oanh, 2021; Do, 2022).

The Vietnamese government has articulated its overall approach to the SCS issue through the Comprehensive Development Strategy underpinned by its Three No's of Defense Policy. While it refrains from forming any alignment with any external power, the country maintains an abiding diplomatic relationship with Russia, pursues a deepening partnership with the US, and at the same time, "struggles and cooperates" with China. These ties Vietnam successfully toggle simultaneously as it continues to make the most out of its ASEAN membership, underscoring the importance of the regional bloc to its vision of development (De Gurung, 2018; Thayer, 2011; 2016; Le, 2012).

Considering the aforementioned points, there arise three aspects of the SCS crisis which needs to be addressed: (1) the direction of the Vietnamese strategy in relation to existing international orders, (2) how it holds up against a peer co-claimant's strategy (the Philippines), and (3) their meaning to the ASEAN WOCM and vice-versa. To appraise these factors, this study has employed Sylvano Mahiwo's Meta-Nation

State Framework to ascertain the interactions in the state-to-state and the state-to-supra-state levels (n.d. a; n.d. b; 2014, 2015).

Such evaluation would lend a better clarification of the country's vision of an international order in achieving a resolution in the maritime dispute and weigh at the same time the Vietnamese impetus in developing the system and managing the inherent consequences. Moreover, this research has appraised the direction of Vietnam's SCS campaign, its emerging middle power leadership's aspiration, as well as its interactions with China, the US, and ASEAN peers. The outcome of this study could serve as guide to the Philippines in the conduct of its relations with immediate and extended neighbors using the case of Vietnam. Finally, this assessment would supply further information to the body of work on endogenous undertakings of ASEAN as a regional organization, which is scantily covered in existing literature that emphasize exogenous factors in regime formation. In particular, this study offers an avenue to understand better the maritime conflict from a non-hegemonic party's perspective especially its implication to the regional organization. The use of theoretical epistemology with a non-Western tradition is a modest contribution of this study to ASEANology (ASEAN studies).

Research Problem

Current developments in the SCS dispute point to a connection between two major players involved: the pronounced skepticism on ASEAN's efficacy as a regional organization, and the opposite, the ascent of Vietnam as the most potent among Southeast Asian co-claimants in challenging China's overtures. However, most available literature centers their investigation on how these actors perform against hegemonic forces. In light of this situation, it is crucial to examine the territorial

contestation in the nexus of regional (ASEAN) and national (Vietnam and the Philippines) levels of actors, their confluences, and/or overlaps. In this regard, this study aims to evaluate the implications of Vietnamese strategies toward the regional organization where the country belongs and a peer co-claimant, the Philippines, as well as the antagonizing empires in the dispute. Such assessment can bring further enlightenment on the state and supra-state strata of peacemaking solution/s to the maritime conflict and initiatives integral to such end especially the ongoing Code of Conduct (COC) formulation between the 10-bloc nation and their neighbor in the north as well as other interventions by enmeshed external powers.

Thus, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does Vietnam strategize with the United States, China, and ASEAN in relation to the SCS dispute?
2. How does Vietnam's SCS strategy compare with Philippines (another Southeast Asian co-claimant's)?
3. What are the implications of Vietnam's and Philippines' SCS strategies to ASEAN's SCS Way of Conflict Management (WOCM) and vice-versa?

Research Objectives

This study assessed the Vietnamese SCS strategies, and the implications of such strategies to ASEAN's WOCM and the ensuing reciprocity. The results of this study could serve as a basis for rendering deeper scholarly discussions on the SCS undertakings by two AMS and their parent regional organization in managing conflicts that emanated from the contestations of the disputed territories.

Thus, this study has the following objectives:

1. To identify the Vietnamese SCS-related strategies toward engaging the United States, China, and ASEAN.
2. To compare the Vietnamese SCS-related strategies with that of the Philippines as co-claimant.
3. To assess the implications of the Vietnamese and Philippine strategies to ASEAN's WOCM and conversely the ASEAN's impact in shaping Vietnamese and Philippine SCS behaviors.

Significance of the Study

This study is a substantial attempt of providing an insider-outsider outlook on the SCS dispute. The inward aspect is manifested through rendering an understanding of the Vietnamese SCS strategies, both the best practices and rooms for improvement, as well as the country's agenda—how it has dealt with and plans to further engage its AMS co-claimants, the external co-claimants, and other interested parties to the dispute. Another side to this perspective is that it delves into the intra-ASEAN praxis about the maritime conflict. The outward aspect, on the other hand, could be gleaned by investigating Vietnam's dealings with ASEAN and vice versa, the enmeshment of extra-regional entities, and the comparative strategies of co-claimant.

In addition, this research grants a voice to a representative Southeast Asian co-claimant in a chorus of scholarship gravitating toward a hegemonic response. With the Vietnam-Philippine-ASEAN nexus as the locus of this academic undertaking, it advances the empowerment of the small powers (the state and a regional organization composed of such capacities) by scrutinizing acting upon their agency given the influences surrounding them, thereby accounting for a non-hegemonic, bottom-up approach-oriented, and non-Western standpoint to the territorial contestation.

Finally, exploring this idea could nurture academic comprehension of the territorial contestation that could be a useful reference for policy-making considerations toward pacific settlement of the geopolitical issue for the benefit not only of the Vietnamese people, but of the population of the littoral states and the enmeshed nations but of the contemporary world.

Limitations of the Study

While there are four co-claimants to the SCS from Southeast Asia, the study concentrates on Vietnam as the AMS that continues to exhibit active engagement and leadership potential in securing its geographic interests in the territorial entanglement. As a result, the study dwelled on diplomatic maneuvers and other related strategies employed by the Philippines and Vietnam relevant to preserve order and prevent military conflict in the international waterways. To satisfy the requirement of the second research objective, the Philippines has been chosen as the point of comparison. Such makes an interesting juxtaposition in presenting the case propounded by this study as the peer co-claimant rivals Vietnam in size of claimed territories as well as performance-wise related to the dispute.

Several factors limit the generalizability of this study. The sample was narrowed down to open-source academic journals published from 2013 to 2023. Developments in the SCS dispute beyond the timeframe are not covered in the study. Also, the journal articles subjected to thematic and content analyses may not completely capture the aspects of the Vietnamese and Philippine SCS strategies and the ASEAN WOCM. To adhere to the trustworthiness criteria of qualitative studies, this study conducted another layer of data-gathering procedure in the form of semi-structured virtual interviews with relevant key informants/experts on the topic. However, the data

generated from this modality is confined to the scope of knowledge of the interviewees on the topic. Thus, the results of this study might not be generalizable to the ongoing circumstances of the geopolitical phenomenon.

As in every case of qualitative studies, thematic and content analyses employ the researcher as the research instrument (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Therefore, a risk of bias and time pressure can influence coding processes and the results. In anticipation of this concern, the researcher increased the likeliness of reliability of utilizing this method by optimizing the iterativeness of the process, by subjecting the data to thematic coding three times as guided by respective audit trails. As an added triangulation measure, the researcher validated the initial result through content analysis, which allowed the emergence of answers to the research questions. The interpretation of results might have been influenced, despite the researcher's efforts to remain unbiased.

Finally, the researcher relied on the perception of the authors of the reviewed literature in examining and understanding the Vietnamese and the Philippine SCS strategies and the ASEAN WOCM.

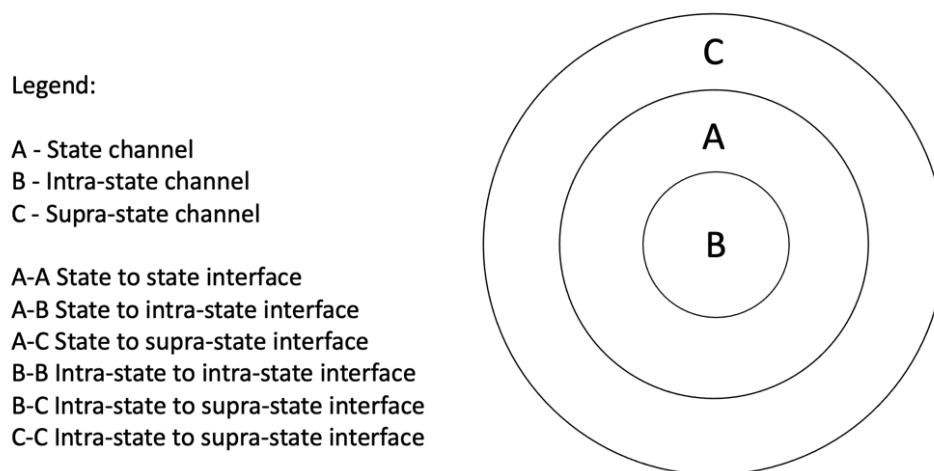
Theoretical Framework

To answer the research question and the research objectives, this study has employed the Meta-Nation State paradigm in guiding the analysis of the data. This model was originally conceptualized by Sylvano Mahiwo as his modest contribution to the development of ASEANology (n.d. a; n.d. b; 2014, 2015) in the Philippines and beyond.

Mahiwo's Meta-Nation State Paradigm

Building upon the Meta-Nation State paradigm by Mahiwo, this study tried to explain the multiplicity of interactions in a global interface. Within the study's context, the model is harnessed to understand the reciprocation among the actors in focus with Vietnam and ASEAN and their interrelatedness with the other actors. As illustrated in the Mahiwo's framework as shown in Figure 1, there are three channels of interface: the middle channel (referred to in the figure below as "B") represents the state level of interface; the innermost channel ("A") represents the intra-state level of interface; and the outermost channel ("C") represents the supra-state level of interface. Capturing the dynamism in international relations, the model produces six distinct interfaces among the three channels: first, state-to-state interface; second, state-to-supra-state interface; third, state-to-intra-state interface; fourth, intra-state to intra-state interface; fifth, intra-state to supra-state interface; and sixth, supra-state to supra-state interface (n.d. a; n.d. b; 2014, 2015).

Figure 1. Mahiwo's Meta-Nation State Framework
Source: Adapted from Mahiwo (n.d. a; n.d. b; 2014, 2015).



ASEANology through the Meta-Nation State Paradigm

Along with the expansion of the association's membership, ASEANology (ASEAN Studies) has since expanded its scope to cover not only the regional organization's geopolitical affairs but also its contemporary political, economic, and socio-cultural aspects. Considered a nascent development in international relations, ASEANology enables a scholarly examination of the region from a perspective that comes from within. It continues to present academic discoveries that challenge the Euro-American-dominated international relations theories (Kang, 2003; Busan and Little, 2010; Layador, 2013).

A core topic frequently delved into by the ASEAN intelligentsia is the regional organization itself. Foremost of these subject matters is the association's diplomatic norm—the ASEAN Way. Anchored on the *musyawarah* (deliberation) and *mufakat* (consensus) traditions of Indonesian customary decision-making, the ASEAN Way guides the members in dealing with regional affairs as well as domestic concerns with intramural repercussions according to the (1) principle of non-interference, (2) quiet diplomacy, (3) non-use of force, and (4) consensus-based decision making (Katsumata, 2004). Clearly from its inception, ASEAN intended to operate as an intergovernmental organization, a form of regional integration that prioritizes state centrism and sovereignty over regional cooperation, and as a multilateral, which promotes (1) indivisibility, (2) non-discrimination, and (3) diffused reciprocity. There are criticisms, however, on ASEAN's nature and one of them is the status of the ASEAN Secretariat. The secretariat itself despite being the association's bureaucratic machinery is seen to have lacked the “political weight” as an institution since it only administers the organization's operations (Layador, 2013). These distinct elements of

ASEAN regionalism put the regional body in contrast with the European Union, which embodies a form of supranationalism, with its Council performing executive and its Parliament legislative powers that are to a certain extent enforceable among its membership.

Mahiwo's Meta-Nation State paradigm speaks of the three channels of interaction by ASEAN state and non-state actors, which resulted in six interfaces across these channels. ASEAN, be it regarded as a formal, political, economic, or socio-cultural region, is known for its inherent diversity, with its member states having variegated geography, topography, forms of government, religiosity, and racial makeup. Evidently, Mahiwo's framework enables an all-encompassing exploration of ASEAN as a discipline that works its way from the popular level, the non-state actor's realm, the state-to-state exchange, and the intramural and extramural reach of the 10-nation bloc, in the political, economic, and socio-cultural aspects. Undeniably, ASEAN is a regional organization that is responsible in ensuring the continuous building of a 'community' that encompasses the three pillars of Political Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural Communities.

Guided by QDA in framing the research method, Mahiwo's paradigm captures the reciprocity among the SCS actors in the study, particularly Vietnam, the Philippines, and the ASEAN. The paradigm also enables this research to capture the AMS' strategies toward the US and China and compare in particular the strategies of Vietnam and the Philippines. Moreover, it enables a thorough examination of the said actors' ordinary interactions as a phenomenon constitutive of the order or regime formation in the contested seas occurring simultaneously, crossing the different channels of the interface.

Conceptual Framework

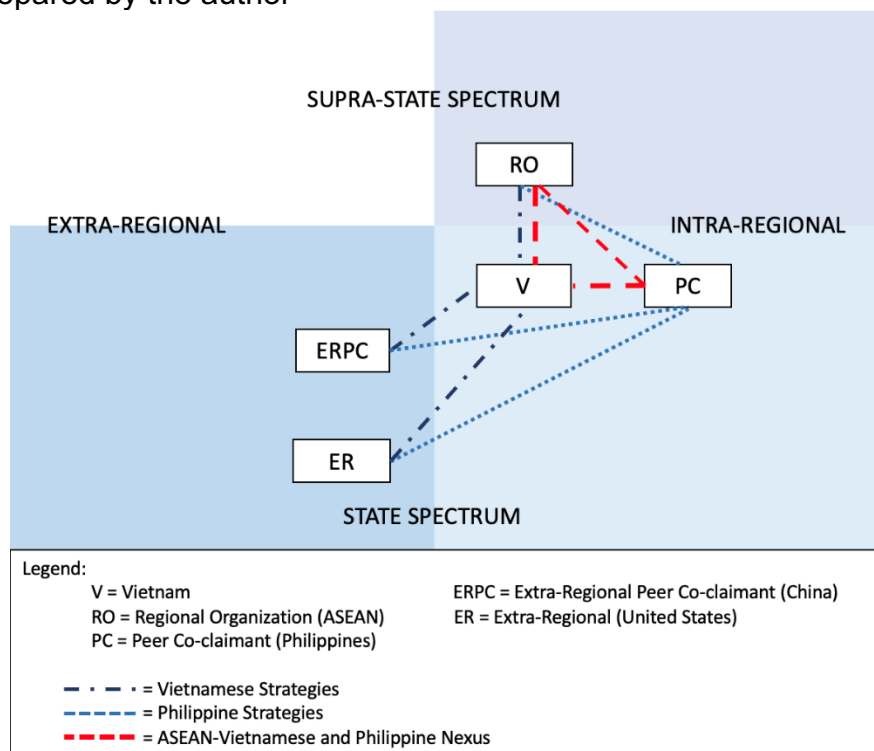
With respect to the first research objective, this study categorized Vietnam's SCS strategies according to their interface with:

1. US
2. China
3. ASEAN

The second objective is to compare and explain Vietnam's SCS strategies with the Philippines, a peer co-claimant in the ASEAN.

The third research objective is to synthesize the analysis and findings from the first and second objectives by ascertaining the reciprocal impacts of Vietnamese and Philippine SCS strategies with their ASEAN counterparts.

Figure 2. Conceptual framework
Source: Prepared by the author



As shown in Figure 2, this study's conceptual framework appropriates elements of Mahiwo's framework. Based on this model, the strategies of Vietnam with respect to the SCS and those of ASEAN in general are determined by their interactions with each other and with other actors—including China and the US—in the maritime conflict. Since the interactions in this topic are beyond the scope of the intra-state channel, only the interactions within the two higher channels will be covered in this study. The main assumption of this study is that the SCS nexus in focus is defined by interactions in the state-to-state and state-to-supra-state interfaces, touching upon Vietnam, the Philippines, and ASEAN's intraregional-ness (or interactions within the perimeter of the regional organization) and extra-regional-ness (or interactions by the country and the regional organization with external entities) in dealing with the territorial contestation.

Based on the illustration above, SCS-related strategies and tactics by sea actors are labeled as follows: "V" for Vietnam, "RO" - short for regional organization that is ASEAN, "PC" to refer to the identified peer co-claimant, e.g. the Philippines, "ER" (extra-regional) that represents the US, and "ERPC" (extra-regional peer co-claimant) that specifically points to China. Their interfaces are plotted in four interlapping halves of the plane. The top rectangle is the supra-state spectrum while the bottom rectangle is the state spectrum as explained in the Mahiwo model. The left rectangle, on the other hand, represents the international relations interactions or dynamics beyond the jurisdiction of ASEAN or made with entities outside the membership of the regional organization while the broken lines represent the reciprocity of implications between the strategies of the subject SCS actors.

Following Mahiwo's argument, this study has successfully identified the actors and their actions that can aptly be categorized within his four planes. Vietnam's SCS

strategies with the US, China, and the Philippines, for instance, are within the state-to-state spectrum (A-A) while the ASEAN WOCM transcends the spectrum to bring about a state-to-supra-state spectrum (A-C). Also, it could be seen that Vietnamese and Philippine SCS strategies directed toward each other and the ASEAN WOCM are categorized as intra-regional while those employed toward the US and China are considered extra-regional. Such postulation is helpful in ascertaining the overall research objective of assessing the implications of intra-ASEAN strategies toward SCS conflict management. This is carried out initially by identifying the elements of the Vietnamese SCS strategy that correspond to the strategies employed by the US, China, the Philippines, and ASEAN. In this regard, this study attributes meaning to an “SCS-related strategy” in the all-encompassing sense of any formal or informal policies, be it under political-security, economic, socio-cultural aspects consequential to the nation-state’s stake in the territorial dispute. The operationalization of such term was inspired by the studies on Vietnamese SCS strategies by Pietrasiak and Pieczara (2019), De Gurung (2018), Thayer (2011; 2016), and Le (2012).

Further, the study provides a comparison of the Vietnamese SCS strategies vis-à-vis its peer co-claimant the Philippines, two of the most active Southeast Asian parties to the dispute. There were studies done in the previous years (Amer and Li in 2012 and Ravindran in 2012, and Philippine-Malaysian SCS strategies by Kreuzer in 2022) that juxtaposed the AMS’ performance in making strides in their individual initiatives, possible cooperation, and engagement with SCS actors such as the US, China, and ASEAN.

For these ends to be achieved, the researcher harnesses QDA in the form of thematic and content analyses as the choice method of inquiry to come up with an understanding of the reality of the SCS dispute. Framing it under the chosen qualitative

research tradition, the study emphasizes the interactions among the SCS actors as the basis of how the reality of the SCS WOCM is constructed in the context of the Vietnam-Philippine-ASEAN nexus.

Operational Definition of Terms

Vietnamese SCS Strategies	Formal or informal policies implemented or planned carried out by the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in managing its territorial claims in the SCS.
Engaging China	refers to the strategic interactions implemented by the Vietnamese government in defining relationship with the government of the People's Republic of China toward the SCS dispute.
Engaging the US	refers to the strategic interactions implemented by the Vietnamese government in defining relationship with the government of the US toward the SCS dispute.
Engaging ASEAN	refers to the strategic interactions implemented by the Vietnamese government in defining relationship with the ASEAN toward the SCS dispute.
ASEAN SCS WOCM	Formal or informal policies implemented or planned carried out by the ASEAN toward

	SCS conflict management evident in the regional organization's instrumentalities.
Philippines SCS Strategies	Formal or informal policies implemented or planned carried out by the government of the Republic of the Philippines in managing its territorial claims in the SCS.
State-to-state interface	refers to the channel of interaction between two nation-states as presented in the Mahiwo model.
State-to-supra-state interface	refers to the channel of interaction between a nation-state and a supra-state entity as demonstrated in the Mahiwo model.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Crucial to the discussion on SCS conflict management is Vietnam's involvement and its effect on ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific order. An indispensable hinge in unlocking understanding of the topic is evaluating the Vietnamese and Philippine contributions to intra-ASEAN SCS conflict management. This chapter provides a survey of existing literature that covers the extent of scholarship on the topic. In the first part, an overview of Vietnam's SCS strategies is presented. In the second part, Vietnam's energy security concerns are covered. The third part discusses the AMS's potential to become a regional leader. An analysis of ASEAN's capacity and capability and the outcomes is presented in the fourth part. In the fifth part, studies on establishing SCS order are reviewed. In the final part, the assessments of the Vietnamese, Philippine and the ASEAN agenda relative to SCS conflict management are underscored.

The Vietnamese SCS Position

The Vietnamese government articulated its official position in the SCS dispute by issuing several instrumentalities, chief of which is the 2019 Defense White Paper. In the document, Vietnam states its claims of “undeniable sovereignty” over the Paracel and Spratly Islands and lays down the “Three No's” of its National Defence Policy: (1) no military alliances with foreign entities; (2) no to military alignment with foreign powers; and (3) no foreign military bases in the Vietnamese territories. However, Hanoi expresses its openness to cooperating in peacemaking resolution for the maritime conflict by abiding by international law, particularly the 1982 United

Nations Convention on the Law on Seas (UNCLOS). Equally, the AMS upholds the UN Charter and the ASEAN, together with its mechanisms, organs, and documents, as the preferred venue to facilitate dialogue on the geopolitical issue. In this regard, Vietnam is set to deal with parties to the dispute especially China, which it acknowledges to share historical claims, by respecting the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and supporting the COC crafting to sustain international law, promote de-militarization, and diffuse aggression in the contested seas through negotiations and consultations. Whereas the country stands by reciprocity as the basis for establishing military relations, it indicated in the white paper its willingness to enter multilateral defense cooperation as long as Hanoi's best interests are protected. Vietnam conveyed its approval of the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) in the SCS at the same time it adhered to delimitating maritime boundaries with Cambodia and Indonesia and the Agreement on the 2011 Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Sea-Related Issues and other pacts with China (Pham Chi Thanh, 2019).

In response to Malaysian communication and submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf the AMS in 2019-2020, a note verbale was released by Vietnam's Permanent Mission to the UN in 2020 reiterating the country's ownership of the territories claimed by China in accordance with the UNCLOS and legal and historical bases (Gutteres, 2020).

To ascertain the Vietnamese position on the SCS dispute, Hiep (2019) resorted to a comparison of the country's stipulations in the crafting of 1999 and the current Single Draft Negotiating Text (SDNT) editions of the COC. He recalled Hanoi's insistence to pursue the adoption of such a document codifying management of the contested waters, coursing it through bilateral and multilateral means: the former by

entering a consultation with the Philippines in 1995; and the latter by accepting assignment by ASEAN, together with the Philippines, to draft the organization's version of the instrumentality. While ASEAN and China were able to reach an agreement, it was downgraded in the form of a non-binding declaration, missing the geographical scope and prohibition of construction on submerged features clauses that Vietnam campaigned for in the ASEAN draft. Despite such an unexpected outcome, Vietnam utilized the document as a reference in protesting Chinese intrusions in the SCS. Hiep clustered the changes between the two versions of the document into four issues based on Nguyen and Thayer's articles. First, it was observed that in the 1999 ASEAN COC, Vietnam specified that the supposed code should apply to both the Paracels, which China views as part of its sovereignty and not for dispute, and the Spratlys; whereas the code is envisioned to comprehensively answer all the SCS-related disputes as reflected in the SDNT. Second, the SDNT tethers the signatories to the provisions of the COC without reservations. Third, it opens avenues for dispute settlement mechanisms. Lastly, the SDNT expands the duty to cooperate by co-claimants to 27 points, comprising promoting adherence to the UNCLOS, making SCS as a non-Air Defense Identification Zone, and upholding non-militarization in the area. It could be seen that the second and third issues are uniquely raised by Vietnam in the SDNT, previously absent in the 1999 ASEAN COC. All in all, while such demands could be met by the other parties with compromises, Hiep concluded that Vietnam has been firm for two decades now in its goal of arriving at what it ascribes from its perspective as a "substantive and effective" COC (2019).

Characterizing Vietnam's SCS strategies

Vietnam puts premium on the SCS as the focal point of its foreign policy. Seeking to explain the influence of Vietnam's SCS strategies on ASEAN, Pietrasialk and Pieczara's 2019 study reviewed Hanoi's SCS-related behavior toward its ASEAN peers, China, and the US and its allies. The authors concluded that Vietnam is adamant about countering China's advances over its sovereign interests in the geographic area while supporting the regional organization's efforts to avoid militarization of the conflict. They have observed Vietnam to be insistent in its campaign for membership to uphold the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) 2016 ruling on the Philippine petition that diminishes China's territorial claims, which received differing viewpoints within the membership, and in crafting the code of conduct over the territory. Also, they perceived Vietnam's attempts to contain the Asian giant's modern imperialism in the region through internationalizing the dispute as congruous with the American "rebalancing" strategy, which in their opinion is counterproductive to resolving the issue amidst a divided ASEAN. However, the study clarified that the Vietnamese do so with caution to maintain amicable relations with the Chinese, who are the region's biggest trade partner and the financiers of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) from which the country could benefit (Pietrasialk and Pieczara, 2019).

In her study, De Gurung (2018) stated that Vietnam has employed a comprehensive development strategy (CDS), a combination of its "Three No's" and hedging tactics, to steer through the volatilities of Sino-Vietnamese bilateral relations against the background of the SCS dispute. Through the "Three No's" policy, Vietnam pledges to (1) prohibit the presence of any foreign military force within its borders, (2) avoid siding with a country against another, and (3) distance itself from forging military cooperation with other states. On the other hand, hedging permits Vietnam to diversify

its approach to maintain valuable linkages with multiple countries. The author observed that the tripartite measures assert Vietnam's unbending stand in the contestation against China, and at the same time, clarify its predisposition toward the practice of restraint in combating China's use of force in the area evident in the sampled accounts of skirmishes between the two littoral states. For the second one, it presents the country's appreciation of its friendship with its long-time comrade. In addition, these twin strategies enabled Vietnam to reap benefits from the US and Japan in monitoring activities in the SCS without infuriating China, thus playing a part in muting any potentialities of armed conflicts in the confluent seas (De Gurung, 2018).

Thayer (2011, 2016) characterized the Sino-Vietnamese bilateralism as an exemplar of an asymmetrically mature relationship brought about by the "tyranny of geography," where the hegemon invokes its ascendancy and the lesser power asserts independence. This parallelism between China as the dominant force and Vietnam as the minor player has led the latter to pursue a two-pronged strategy: "struggle" and "cooperation." For the former, the author pertained to Hanoi's embarking on challenging China on its bid to encroach on Vietnamese EEZ assets. Such a tactic was found effective during the 2014 crisis when Vietnam deployed maritime forces and launched a propaganda war that forced China to withdraw from installing an oil rig in the Paracel Islands and send home the escorting naval fleet. For the latter, Vietnam prefers to negotiate state-to-state through high-level visits of party and state leaders and fortifying economic cooperation with China and engage the Asian giant in multilateral venues. As a counter-strategy measure, Vietnam is bolstering its self-reliance through a force modernization program where the country purchased six *Varshavyanka* submarines from Russia and accepted training for its submariners from India. Thus, the author in both studies elucidated the imperative for Vietnam, as the

less advantaged party in the geopolitical hierarchy, to employ the three-fold program to keep China and its ambitions over the SCS in check (Thayer, 2011; 2016).

For Le (2012), Vietnam's foreign policy *in toto* could be seen through three different lenses. First is through the neo-realist view, where the country shifts its inclination toward what is favorable in prevailing conditions such as diversifying its methods in confronting China and its hegemonic advances. Next is through neo-institutional liberalism, which highlights Vietnam's *doi moi* economic miracle since 1986 as a leverage to improve its status within the ASEAN and attract partnerships with extra-regional entities. Lastly, through the globalist lens, which perceives the country as maximizing its membership in ASEAN and other multilateral platforms to push for its interests, chief of which is to internationalize engagement in the SCS that will keep China under surveillance with the help of the US and the Western bloc. The author accounted for these plural ways of assessing the Vietnamese foreign policy as instrumental in positioning Vietnam as an emerging middle power in the Indo-Pacific political and economic realms (Le, 2012).

To Phan (2022), Vietnam's warming up relations with the US never entailed abandoning its prized ties with China. He further argued that Vietnam is determined to tether itself to both superpowers to cope with its plight of preserving its autonomy. While confronted with territorial dispute, the Sino-Vietnamese bilateral relations are continuously nurtured with cooperative arrangements such as the delimitation treaty on the Gulf of Tonkin and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, among other economic development ventures that fit to their respective interests. China remains an indispensable ally for Vietnam in ensuring communist regime survival, with the ruling parties in the two authoritarian countries standing together to keep foreign intervention and pro-democratic revolutions at bay. Phan in particular exemplified President

Nguyen Xuan Phuc's April 2021 statement, which reiterates the country's support for the One-China Policy and non-interference in domestic politics. In fact, Vietnam reneged from its 15 defense exchange activities with Washington to appease Chinese apprehensions. In the same vein, Vietnam refrains from elevating the US as a strategic partner and in using the term "Indo-Pacific," which can be interpreted as the country's reassurances to China despite the flourishing collaborations with the US (Phan, 2022).

Vietnam's Energy Security Concerns as Game Changer

Pham's 2014 study offered an insider's understanding of the Vietnamese SCS strategies by interviewing officials from Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Industry and Trade. In the end, the research was able to summarize the input of the Vietnamese officials regarding Vietnam's SCS-related diplomacy in four thrusts. First of these is that the country is committed to building mutual trust despite the divergent interests and fluctuating political will among its ASEAN colleagues. Second, it aims to frame territorial acquisition in the SCS based on cooperation among claimant states. Third, it views the SCS as a resource of solution not only to its energy security concerns but to the region's as well—a factor that it considers as a crux in ending the friction over the waterways. Lastly, it is bracing itself to undertake joint development agreements, which it sees as a win-win solution both for its domestic energy concerns and the diplomatic atmosphere in the Indo-Pacific. In support of this statement, the study dissected the country's portfolio on the joint development agreement on natural resources management (Pham, 2014).

From Tüter's perspective (2022), energy security concerns will be the driving force determining the Vietnamese SCS strategy's direction. As oil production and export productivity are heading downward, the AMS looks to the abundant reserves in

the contested seas for solutions. To carry out this plan, Hanoi is keen on partnering with external parties, namely Japan, India, and Russia, to harness potential energy resources in the maritime area. However, the author warned that China is protesting this internationalized Vietnamese vision, thus its response to Hanoi's exploration ventures with aggression. Quoting Ross, the author asserted that the competition for energy security will exacerbate the tensions in the SCS. He added that this reaction could be gleaned as another stumbling block to the completion of the COC, as China intends to confine the development of oil and gas in the water space only among the co-claimants and steer clear of extra-regional entities, let alone contain US intervention in the conflict. To avoid heating up friction between China and Hanoi, the author recommended that Vietnam and China advance agreement on the delimitating maritime boundaries past the Gulf of Tonkin, where the Paracel Islands are located. Also, Hanoi must strive to accomplish such a goal with the other co-claimants, such as the Philippines and Indonesia. Most importantly, the AMS should contribute to galvanizing energy security cooperation among the co-claimants (Tüter, 2022).

Vietnamese academicians Truong-Minh and Huynh (2014) assessed the prospects of a joint development venture in the SCS from Vietnam's vantage point. Looking back on the attempt to conduct such an arrangement with China and the Philippines in the contested seas in 2005, the authors investigated the reticence of the aforementioned Southeast Asian co-claimants to a similar cooperative scheme brokered by the Chinese government in 2009. Based on commentaries by state officials and academic pundits cited in the study, it was found that both the Philippines and Vietnam expressed reservations about a joint marine seismic undertaking (JSMU) with China for its unwillingness to submit to multilateral and international law-sanctioned arrangements. Both AMS contended that the governance of such

undertakings should be explored under the dictates of the 1982 UNCLOS. Also, since all of them have acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the DOC, they expect the Asian giant to exercise restraint in using force to secure interests in the maritime territory. Conversely, China commands JSMU as a realization of cooperative schemes encapsulated in the DOC and TAC. As noted by the authors, China's increasing military and economic powers were seen by the Philippines and Vietnam to abet hegemonic control and juridical standing over its claims, to their detriment. As could be discerned from its belligerent revanchism in the conflicted water space, China is bent on railroading its ambitions by itself. For this, the authors concluded that China could allay the AMS co-claimants' fears of its abusing the asymmetrical relationship between them if it could demonstrate balancing national interest and regional solidarity. Failing to do so results in turning them away to bandwagon with the US reconcentration efforts (Truong-Minh and Huynh, 2014).

Vietnam's Outlook as A Regional Leader

Building on the application of Foucault's power-knowledge linkage in international relations, Do (2022) ventured into appraising Vietnam's potential as a middle power in Asia. This was executed by measuring the country's performance against four factors defining a broad-based middle powership criteria posited by the author. First, socio-economic prowess, where Vietnam recorded impressive GDP growth that propelled the country from low to middle-income tier. Such status is also contributed by the maintenance of its rank as "one of the best-performing economies in the world" in 2011-2020 and even after the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the enlargement of its diplomatic network to 189 countries through its various membership and leadership positions in multilateral fora. Second, its increasing proactivity in

responding to its commitment to niche diplomacy by providing aid to countries needing support for human development concerns. Third, Vietnam actualizes its good international citizenship by shouldering responsibilities to promote world cooperation via the UN, ASEAN, and their respective organs and treaties, especially the UNCLOS 1982. Lastly, geopolitical power, where Vietnam's efforts in diversification of its diplomatic realm prove a good model for navigating the multipolar world order, particularly the SCS dispute. Despite these achievements, Vietnam was assessed to be possessing "modest material resources and limited normative power" to be on par with the established middle powers and to cope securely with China's ascent. In a way, Vietnam can be regarded as a "swing state" due to its historical placement in the crux of the Indian and Chinese civilizations and now a "bridge" that stabilizes the Sino-American bipolarism in the Southeast Asian region. Also, the country has become a bastion of omnidirectionality in ASEAN, being endowed with leverage with the hegemons. Inspired by Vietnamese Premier Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic ideology, the indigenous view on the country's middle powership can be derived from preserving its agency grounded in safeguarding the nation-state's core interests in the global context, underpinned by its bamboo diplomacy rooted in multiple strategic partner powers. In the same vein, the author ended his study by stating that Vietnam's transformation from a geopolitical weakling in the past to being a post-colonial vanguard of independent foreign policy in a changing international system testifies to the country's rightful recognition as an emerging middle power (Do, 2022).

In the systematic literature review by Karim and Nabila (2022), they have established Vietnam as a middle power due to its military and economic performance and its influential foreign policy. Vietnam's identification as one of the Indo-Pacific middle powers in focus was determined through the authors' appropriation of Holsti's

role conception under role theory, which takes roots in “how a country positions its behaviour based on its own perceptions (2022:235).” The study’s primary aim was to gauge Vietnam’s role as an Indo-Pacific middle power by ascertaining its position relative to a framework of two factors. First is the level of alignment with the US, which determines the extent of the middle power’s ability to counterbalance against China. Next is the gravity of geopolitical entanglement in a territorial dispute with China. The study considered Vietnam to be in “low-level alignment with the US” due to non-existent formal relations between the two nations, with the country exhibiting a flourishing political and economic partnership with the US while continuing to enhance its trade with China. Likewise, it was found out in the study that the AMS harbors a “high-risk geographical tension with China” considering the several encounters between the two camps and the maintenance of military forces in the contested body of water. For these reasons, Karim and Nabila labeled Vietnam as an “active independent” middle power in the confluent seas, noting its non-aggressive, self-reliance policy in dealing with China’s intrusion in the SCS and unpronounced relationship with the US. However, they are intimating that Vietnam is open to developing a military alliance with the US if it sees proper to be able to defend its high stakes in the SCS, despite its historical and ideological familiarity with China (Karim and Nabila, 2022).

For Chubb (2020), several AMS possess the potential to become middle powers depending on the parameters for such identities. Vietnam’s case is unique in comparison to the middle powers in the region due to the lack of the superlative distinction about territorial size, gross domestic product, type of government, etc. He argued that Vietnam’s strength as a middle power could be ascertained by looking at how it optimizes its niche in multilateral setups such as the ASEAN, Comprehensive

and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership, European Union-ASEAN cooperation, and the ASEAN Regional Forum, and more recently, its chairmanship of the 10-nation bloc. Apparently, Vietnam faces the almost impossible charge of firming up division within ASEAN in relation to the SCS dispute. Inherent to its geopolitical investment in the SCS dispute, Vietnam has taken a stance that has put it at odds with its China-aligned peers. In this regard, Chubb suggested ways for Vietnam to demonstrate its potency as a middle power by galvanizing cooperation from its peers to act upon the maritime conflict. The country could demonstrate this ability by opening avenues for co-management of the waterways and its natural resources such as replicating the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, starting a co-fisheries management scheme, and organizing cooperation zones among the littoral states. An equally imperative measure that Vietnam could effect is to assemble the membership to interlocations geared toward exacting common positions such as releasing statements that would neutralize Chinese encroachments in the SCS as well as an opinion on FONOPs by the US (Chubb, 2020).

A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis was conducted by Thuong and Oanh (2021) on Vietnam's positioning in the Indo-Pacific region. The country's leadership potential in various sectors was mentioned in the study, such as its ascension to UN and ASEAN chairmanship positions, COVID-19 performance, and its SCS dispute maneuvers. The country's centrality was dissected in accordance with its relationship with the American-led Quad and the force it seeks to counterbalance against, the Chinese. The study investigated Vietnam's ties with the macro-spherical minilateral and how it plays in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Strengths, as listed, were Hanoi's geographical advantage in confluent seas, its robust economy that withstood even the COVID-19 pandemic's effects, and its smooth

maneuvering hedging approach to attract US intervention in its SCS while assuaging China to remain as its main trade partner. The country's weaknesses included its dilapidated infrastructure, dependence on China for demand and supply, and non-committal military stance. Regarding opportunities, Vietnam could unleash itself from the Chinese ambit to a new supply chain from the Indo-Pacific region, engage in sustainable-centered infrastructural development through membership in the Blue Dot Network, and multilateralize the SCS dispute to curtail Chinese excesses. Nevertheless, the authors cautioned Vietnam of the following threats: avoid provoking China's wrath toward joining the Quad Plus; moderate overwhelming ambitions and prove actual capacity; incur imbalance between regionalization and globalization; sustain economic growth; deepen ASEAN incompatibility with the Indo-Pacific vision; and unduly weaken multilateralism in effort to promote minilateralism (Thuong and Oanh, 2021).

Emmers and Huong's 2020 study essayed to comprehend Vietnam's potential for sectoral leadership, particularly in the ASEAN maritime security aspect. The authors assimilated several studies on sectoral leadership to formulate a parameter of the study, stating that such niche positioning within the regional organization can be comprehended through Vietnam's ability to galvanize participation from its peers by steering to convergence their respective security interests. Under the realist lens, the research narrowed down Hanoi's rationale to prime itself for such posture: first, to protect its security needs; second, to position itself in the anarchic international order. Emmers and Huong observed that Vietnam has been maximizing its membership in the association to push for domestic gains and foreign leverage. Lending credence to such statement is Vietnam's continuing engagement with China while endeavoring to internationalize the SCS dispute despite the limitations of the ASEAN Way. Seeking

to identify the country's capability to fill in the said vacuum in the regional organization, the authors listed the areas where Vietnam could have demonstrated its perceived leadership: bridging Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar's accession to ASEAN; proposing the nuclear-free ASEAN policy, and active involvement in the ASEAN-Free Trade Area, ASEAN Plus, and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus. Although Vietnam never brought China to the court in relation to the SCS controversy, it became the lone AMS co-claimant activist when Duterte assumed the Philippine presidency and softened the country's stance against China. Thus, the authors laid down the terms that Vietnam must deliver to assert its security leadership in Southeast Asia: 1) strategic relevance or centrality to the ASEAN; 2) economic stability; 3) balance amid the Sino-American bipolarity; and 4) government legitimacy. They have noted that the country has already been performing on the first three conditions; however, its enduring authoritarianism and competition with Thailand for bellwether-ship in mainland Southeast Asia made them question its prospect as a well-rounded sectoral frontrunner (Emmers and Huong, 2020).

Vietnam's Commitment to Multilateralism

Chapman (2017) explored Vietnam's multidirectional diplomatic strategy vis-à-vis its asymmetrical relationship with China and the Post-Cold War multipolar system in international relations. His study traced the beginning of such trajectory taken by the AMS from the *doi moi* (renovation) era, which started the Vietnamese embrace of internationalization in 1986. The author defined multidirectionalism, also referred to as omni-directionalism, as "a foreign policy that seeks to diversify relationships in order to reap as many political, economic, and security benefits as possible, all while hedging against potential threats in an increasingly integrated, multipolar international

order (2017:34).” Evidently, the author made apparent Vietnam’s case’s similarity with small powers such as the former constituent republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), its ASEAN peer Thailand, and the middle power Japan, all broadening engagement with major powers US, China, the EU, and Russia, instead of confining partnership with just one of them. Such comparison led Chapman to subsume that Vietnam, as one of the lesser powers, compensates for entrenchment in an asymmetrical relationship with a hegemon by drawing support from as many actors as possible. In this framework, the author identified the three mechanisms through which Vietnam exemplifies its multidirectionalism. First is the strategic partnership that Vietnam has entered into with 16 different countries to ensure its “non-alignment and strategic autonomy.” Second is a trade agreement with eight partners including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), of which the AMS capitalized to avoid becoming overly dependent on a single power for economic stability. Third is multilateralism, in which the country instrumentalized ASEAN to curb China’s SCS overtures, contributed to the UN’s peacekeeping missions, and benefited from 80 percent of foreign direct investments from Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) member countries. Therefore, Chapman concluded that Vietnam was able to secure its sovereignty and economic interests by way of spreading its diplomatic scope to multiple actors (Chapman, 2017).

Relative to the development of Vietnamese multilateralism, Ha and Le’s 2021 article examined the diplomatic policy direction taken by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) throughout the years, segmented into five periods.

- First, the nascent days of the party under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and the struggle for Vietnam’s independence (1919-1945), when he sought the intervention of the major Allied Powers, especially the US, in liberating

Vietnam from France. Failing to enjoin American support for his case, the CPV founder turned to its fellows in the *Association des indigenes de toutes les colonies* composed of progressive leaders from French colonies in Latin America and Africa.

- Second, from Vietnam's independence to the duration of the Vietnam War (1945-1975), the country responded to the denial of its UN application by seeking participation in international events that enabled it to gain recognition from the USSR and eventually enlist in the socialist bloc, as well as joining the non-aligned group of newly independent nation-states in the 1955 Bandung Conference. Also, Vietnam appealed to the international community to discourage the US from throwing itself into the war.
- Third, grappling with unification and post-war recovery (1975-1990) as well as the looming defense threat from the Khmer Rouge and China, Vietnam was finally admitted to the UN in 1977 and joined the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance of the Socialist Bloc (COMECON) in 1978 while continuing to solicit aid from non-aligned countries.
- Fourth, from 1990 to 2016, Vietnam cultivated further its socialist-regime market-oriented economy by opening doors to foreign trade along with the expansion of its diplomatic relations, such as accession to the ASEAN in 1995, the APEC in 2007, and the World Trade Organization in 2007. Also, the country began to position itself in important roles within the UN, particularly its UN Security Council non-permanent member seat from 2008-2009.
- Fifth, for a period of five years (2016-2021), Vietnam pushes for deeper integration into the world by pursuing involvement in multilateral

arrangements as part of the country's strategy outlined by the CPV in its 12th National Congress. Within this half decade, Hanoi served as the venue for the APEC Summit in 2017 and the World Economic Forum in 2018, brokered participation in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Europe-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement, and the RCEP in addition to joining the Belt and Road Summit, the G-20 meeting, and 40th ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly.

As manifested by the CPV's navigation of its diplomatic strategy in modern Vietnamese history, the authors identified (1) security, (2) economic development, and (3) international stance as the three dimensions that highlighted the country's national interests (2021). More interestingly, the CPV named in its 13th National Congress Political Report ASEAN, the UN, and APEC as Hanoi's priority multilateral institutions. Ha and Le postulated that the AMS saw ASEAN as a stepping stone to international recognition and as a venue to enhance its territorial integrity, especially against China over the SCS; the UN as to legitimize its standing as a sovereign state and recognition of its territorial assets; and the APEC to bolster its economy (2021). They concluded their study similar to Chapman's inference that Vietnam, being a small power, harnesses multilateral frameworks as a buffer against more powerful states (Ha and Le, 2021).

In the same vein, Vuving (2022) looked into the CPV's motives and the Vietnamese worldview in studying Hanoi's diplomatic strategy in the face of the ever-changing global geopolitical landscape throughout the *doi moi* era. The study pointed to four different phases and turning points of Vietnamese foreign policy evolution, where each of them is characterized by the policy currents that resulted from the domestic effects of prevailing international causes.

- During the final years of the Cold War from 1986-1989, Vietnam's Neo-reformist Stalinist Statehood foreign policy was deeply influenced by Gorbachev's *perestroika* (restructuring), *glasnost* (transparency), and new thinking, which gave rise to the "modernizers"—a politburo keen to address economic stagnation by introducing *doi moi* without skirting the orthodox communist tenet. Aside from its welcoming foreign direct investments, Vietnam in this period articulated to the Philippines its desire to accede to ASEAN and relaxed its position against China.
- For the next period (1989 to 2003), following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the anti-Westerners-dominated CPV adopted a three-tier diplomatic diversification priority: first, its communist peers; second, the Asia-Pacific region countries, and lastly, the West. Powered by its Grand Two-Headed Strategy, Vietnam normalized relations with the US and China and pushed multidirectionalization by joining the ASEAN. It is worth noting that it was also within this period that Hanoi and China mutually demarcated shared boundaries on land and in the Tonkin Gulf.
- The period 2003-2014 saw a CPV that envisioned Vietnam as a "rent-seeking state in disguise" that sought to harness American unipolarity in global affairs, especially in counterbalancing against China's SCS aggressions, establishing cooperative partnerships with major and lesser powers, and entering the World Trade Organization and a number of free trade agreements with capitalistic nations, all while maintaining the CPV's tight political control over the country.
- From 2014-2022, witnessed were Vietnam's departure from Chinese dependence, seeking stronger ties between Hanoi and Washington, and

drawing closer to its Indochinese neighbors and ASEAN peers. Such a predisposition toward strengthening Vietnamese-American friendship was triggered by the oil rig incident in 2014, which overturned domestic feelings against increasing Chinese hostilities over the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This period characterized by a CPV of moderates and dwindling anti-Westerners. To avoid being hemmed in by its neighbor in the north while incompletely surrendering itself to the West, Vietnam engaged Asian countries through defense ministerial meetings with Japan and nurtured the trilateral agreement with Cambodia and Laos.

To forecast the next turning point of Vietnamese foreign policy, Vuving presented a paradigm listing the likelihood of an international cause and its domestic effect and foreign policy implications. His matrix anticipated that worsening Chinese expansionism and Cambodian tilt to China away from Vietnam could bring about the rise of the modernizers, propelling Vietnamese alignment with the US and its allies. Assuming that either the US and China's influence in the Indo-Pacific is curbed by internal crises, the paradigm envisages Vietnam drawing closer to Russia, India, and Japan, and the ASEAN leadership for the former due to the prevalence of CPV moderates, while it could horizontalize its relations for the latter with the rise of rent-seekers. In addition, the matrix provided a medium-to-low, two-pronged possibility of either hegemon's ascendancy over the other: American dominance could mean the rise of US-sympathizer modernizers, and Chinese supremacy can buttress links with Russia, India, and Japan, which is favorable to the moderates. Lastly, Vuving perceived a low chance of China turning its back to Marxism and Leninism as well as winning Laos' trust from Vietnam, which could result in the resurfacing of the

modernizers that either way could push the country deeper into the Euro-American orbit (Vuving, 2022).

Comparison with an ASEAN Peer Co-Claimant

Another angle explored by scholars in examining the Vietnamese SCS strategy is juxtaposing it against a peer co-claimant. Such is the aim of Amer and Li's (2012) study in seeking to understand the background and the developments thereafter in the territorial dispute by assessing the Philippines and Vietnam's respective bilateral relationships with China. The review of Sino-Vietnamese diplomatic ties was reckoned from 1991, when the normalization of relations between the traditional neighbor-rivals took place, which shared terrestrial and maritime boundaries. It was discussed how Vietnam managed to negotiate through series of high-level visits and rounds of talks on border demarcation agreement with China via the *Land Border Treaty* in 1999 and the *Agreement on the Demarcation of Waters, Exclusive Economic Zones and Continental Shelves in the Gulf of Tonkin* in 2000. For its three overlapping SCS claims with its neighbor in the North, Vietnam limits the agenda to the Spratlys as to avoid legitimizing China's contention over the Paracels and the East Vietnamese continental shelf stakes. A series of encounters in the SCS from 2009 led to the *Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding Sea-Related Issues* that deals with water spaces "beyond the mouth of the Tonkin" through the establishment of a department-level hotline between the two countries later in 2011. On the other hand, the authors saw a friendly start for Sino-Philippine relations in 1975, despite a number of skirmishes along the way, most notably the 1995 Mischief Reef and 1997 Scarborough Reef incidents. Since then, both countries have been observed to have worked out conflict management not only at the bilateral level through joint consultations and issuing

communiqués, but also involving ASEAN in the process. Cooperation between the two co-claimants heightened during the Arroyo Administration, which sanctioned the 2004 trilateral oil exploration venture China-Philippines-Vietnam Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking (JSMU). This collaboration was eventually aborted due to domestic pressures in the Philippines. An administration change in 2010 drifted the Philippines to a defiant stance against Chinese overtures in the SCS—it refuted China’s nine-dash line at the 2011 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, censured the attempt to enter the JSMU, and fielded a British company to conduct oil and gas exploration in the Reed Bank. The 2012 Scarborough Reef standoff negatively impacted national sentiments, tourism, and fishing in the Philippines. For the authors, they observed that Vietnam managed tensions with China by responding to the latter’s preference for bilateral negotiations, resulting in treaty making and instituting bilateral mechanisms to quell frictions. In contrast, the Philippines lacked such measures, which is detrimental to its bilateral relations with China. When it was caught in the similar situation, the Philippines chose to look beyond the import of dyadic exchange by invoking its 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty with the US, campaigning for the COC in the ASEAN, and resorting to international law through a tribunal petition, [*which later materialized*]. The authors suggested that the three countries adhere to the DOC in improving conflict management and support COC crafting (Amer and Li, 2012; italics mine).

Ravindran’s 2012 study inquired into how China can translate economic coercion into political gains in the SCS dispute by putting side by side the Philippine and Vietnam situations. The paper utilized Hufbauer et al’s concept of economic coercion, or “the deliberate government-inspired withdrawal, or threat of withdrawal, of customary trade or financial relations (2012:106).” At the time of the investigation, both Southeast Asian countries were experiencing strained relations with the Asian

giant in 2012, the Philippines with the Scarborough Reef incident and Vietnam by legislating ownership of the Paracels, which were seen by the author as the best case to test his hypothesis. In the 2011 data, it was evident that China's economic pressure is worse felt by Hanoi's export-dependent market, as more than a third (36.34 percent) of its gross domestic product (GDP) is under trade with China vis-à-vis the Philippines at 5.6 percent. (2012). This is illustrated in Vietnam's energy dependence on China, where it imports 60 percent of its power and plant utilities. However, caution should be observed by China as 67 percent of its investments in Vietnam are wholly owned. The Philippines, however, can suffer as well from the Chinese import ban on fruits and nuts and travel restrictions, which was implemented after the 2012 standoff, and Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) withdrawal. While it wields sway over Philippine manufacturing and telecommunications sector supply disruptions, China pursuing such action might prove to receive less-favorable returns instead. Nevertheless, the author concluded that Vietnam can easily rebuff peripheral or central Chinese concession demands due to calculations by the CPV and their and the public's negative view of China due to their historical enmity. The Philippines, however, might find China's behest irresistible when pressure targets particular groups, case in point the lifting of annual ban on Chinese fishing over the banana embargo of 2012. Be that as it may, Ravindran intimated that such equations can be challenged when the US enters the picture and if the countries would shift view of the SCS dispute from being a "modest" or "major" national issue (Ravindran, 2012).

A relevant discussion on comparative studies on SCS co-claimants is found in Kreuzer's 2016 paper, which assayed to see parallelism between the Malaysian and Philippine reactions to Chinese policies in the contested seas and how China responds to their behaviors with restraint and aggression, respectively. As two of Vietnam's

ASEAN peer co-claimants, Malaysia and the Philippines were found to align and challenge the Asian giant's "self-role" (how China sees itself) and "world order" (how China wants others to see itself) conceptions—that China deserves respect for its legitimacy as a normative power and that it envisions an international system deviant of Western-centric, liberalistic uniformity, devoid of external interference but of harmony. The author perceived Malaysia's vanguard-ship among its ASEAN peers to establish relations with China, non-accession to the US-led South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), opting for quiet diplomacy with the Americans, and refraining from casting aspersions on controversial events in China such as the Tiananmen incident as ways that the country expresses its recognition of China's self-role and world order conceptions despite enacting the 1979 EEZ Act that contradicts Chinese SCS claims, occupying several Spratlys features, and conducting oil and gas extraction from the contested territories. Meanwhile, the opposite happened with the Philippines: swinging stance toward China came with every turnover of leadership. During the Corazon Aquino's government, the presence of US military bases in the Philippines came to an end, and the country began high-level talks with China on the Spratlys. However, the succeeding Ramos government pursued a pro-Western inclination and a unilateral survey in the SCS. The Arroyo administration, referred to as the "Golden Period" of Sino-Philippine relations, almost triumphed in sealing the deal on the JSMU. Yet, a reversal cropped up in the picture as the government sought political survival against nationalistic sentiment through villainizing China. While a tempered approach toward China was initiated by the Benigno Simeon Aquino's administration, a series of encounters in the contested seas convinced the Philippines to seek the US, ASEAN, and the UN interventions, and subsequently elevated the dispute to the international law tribunal. Kreuzer's inquiry was able to confirm the

study's hypotheses. The first hypothesis proposes that Malaysia's regard for its asymmetrical relationship with China won the latter's moderated assertion, resembling Womack's quid-pro-quo transaction "between deference and autonomy". The second hypothesis contains about the Philippines as recipient of a higher level of Chinese aggression due to its combative responses that distracted China's goal of universal harmony (Kreuzer, 2016).

Toward Establishing International Order in the SCS

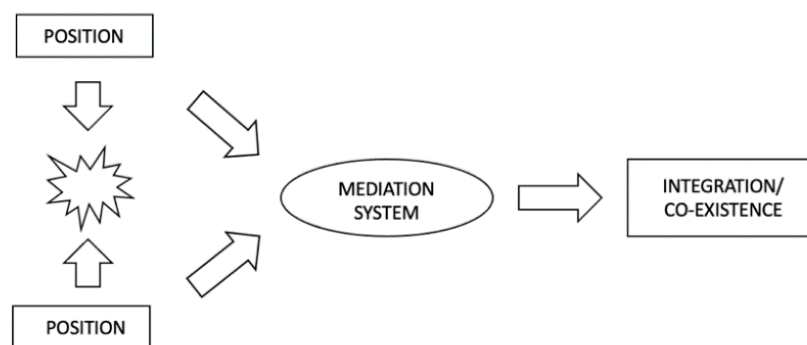
Various interests, preemptive actions, and legal underpinnings have complicated disputes in East Asia, argued Baviera (2013). Her study untangled four layers of security challenges in East Asia: 1) territorial disputes among states in the region; 2) the overlapping claims as warranted by the effectivity of the UNCLOS; 3) the resulting maritime safety and security issues; and 4) military competition among major powers to secure interests in the contested water space. For her, the key to learning the realities of the situation comes from knowing the bilateralism-multilateralism nexus in the region. In this regard, she borrowed Ruggie's meaning of multilateralism—"[a] coordination [taking] place on the basis of indivisibility, generalized principles of conduct, and where benefits are enjoyed by participants not immediately but via diffuse reciprocity (2013:103)." For bilateralism, she drew from Capie and Evans's definition: "transactional, exclusionary 'inter-state relations'... best organized on a one-on-one or dyadic basis (2013:103)." From this enmeshment, she observed that networks of bilateral and multilateral agreements have been erected, which could be understood through claimant-centered and security architecture-centered analyses. For the first one, she stated that the Spratlys issue is multilateral in nature, while bilateralism could reinforce or subvert SCS cooperation. In the second

one, she opined that US bilaterals can “coexist or integrate into a multilateral approach in the Asia-Pacific.” She asserted that permutations of the nexus in the SCS will shape the region’s security architecture, citing that US bilateral relations can be felt in propping its allies’ capacities to deal with what China will be bringing to the table in the future. For her, multilateralism could horizontalize the claims, taking them out of being particularized to a generalized one, an attempt that ASEAN is banking on with its pursuit of the COC (Baviera, 2013).

The International Crisis Group (ICG) (2018) released a report on the Sino-American bipolarity toward building an international order in the SCS. As indicated in the paper, the two largest economic powers are forming their own competing orbits of management of the contested territories. China is pushing for a “Community of Common Destiny,” an idea rooted in Classical Chinese ideology, while the US advocates a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” as part of its Pivot to Asia program. Robustly underwriting China’s plan is the BRI, a massive infrastructural financing scheme that aims to connect China to the world by constructing continental and maritime silk roads. In contrast, the US embarks on rekindling its strongholds in the region after Trump’s isolationist policies. As China exerts dominance over the contested seas against the Southeast Asian littoral states, the US has forged the Quad, a minilateral arrangement with Indo-Pacific powers Japan, India, and Australia. All these developments renew the SCS as a major flashpoint for the contemporary empire wars between the two superpowers. However, the report ridiculed what it described as absurd claims by both hegemons—China’s nine-dash lines have been broken by the Philippine arbitration win in 2016; whereas the US invokes its hypocritical self-appointed authority in challenging unlawful assertions in the SCS when it has yet to ratify the UNCLOS. Even for the other claimants, the Group insisted

that they conform their territorial entitlements to the guidelines set by the convention. All in all, the report recommended that the claimants, as well as the US and other external parties, center their plans and actions on existing law such as the UNCLOS. The US should accede to the convention for integrity and stimulate marine resource management among Southeast Asian claimants. Likewise, China is urged to respect the rulings, desist from threatening and infringing on the territorial lines of other parties, and more importantly, support the crafting of the SCS COC. Both states are charged to undertaking dialogues to bolster mutual understanding (ICG, 2018).

Figure 3. Functions of mediation regime
Source: Oishi (2016), simplified by the author



Oishi (2016) introduced a novel perspective on international regime formation, calling it the “mediation regime.” The concept builds upon Krasner’s definition of international regime: a tacit, converging understanding by actors with intersecting agenda of a specific concern. For this aspect, he defined a mediation regime as “an international regime that is vested with conflict management functions such as: ensuring the non-violent conduct of the parties to the dispute with norms, principles, and rules, addressing incompatibilities in the dispute, and reducing tension among the parties arising from them (2016b:161).” In addition, he further defined the regime type

as an international regime where parties are implementing regime-like interactions whether they are aware of it or not, or if they consented to participation in it or not. Cognizant of the established thoughts on international regimes, he conceptualized that this type of regime keeps in line with aforementioned scholarly definitions above yet is adjusted to render a conflict management-conducive regime by (1) equipping it with regulative functions, which pertains to “effectively control the behavior of the parties such as ‘institutional binding’ and ‘institutional balancing’”, (2) allowing constitutive functions to reframe incompatibilities for progress in reconciliation, (3) mounting economic development interdependence among conflicting parties as a confidence-building measure that negates chances of military escalation or other hostilities, (4) and instituting effective crisis management mechanism to diffuse antagonistic tendencies. Oishi further observed that such an arrangement exists in the case of ASEAN in the SCS dispute, taking cue from the organization’s ASEAN Way of Conflict Management (WOCM) characterized by non-interference and non-confrontational norms of problem-solving. He figured that the ASEAN Way has continuously evolved to accommodate the changing needs of interstate conflict among its membership, making the association an “incubator of regime” throughout its longevity (Oishi, 2016).

While identifying the nine regimes encapsulated in the UNCLOS governing matters related to the law of the sea, Yu (2015) devoted a separate chapter in his book on international regimes in line with the aforementioned literatures. The author harnessed the One-Dot Theory model in interpreting mainly the Chinese perspective as well as the opposite with regard to SCS governance. Though a complicated perspective, in simpler terms, the model derives its epistemological method from the complementarity of Sino-ideological elements of “yin” and “yang” or the equivalent pairing of the dialectical and non-dialectical that could be summarized into a singular

point, or the “one dot.” From this approach, the author identified two obstacles to forming, maintaining, and sustaining an international regime among adversaries in the SCS. Acknowledging the lack of consensus in defining what international regime means in the parlance of international relations, he, however, opined that the Chinese government rejects the imperative to cooperate with a regime, despite its propensity toward establishing order and control. Or if it acquiesces to such an arrangement, he assured that China will impose its “maxi-mini” approach to an international regime—“maximization of rights and minimization of responsibilities (quoting Kim, 2015:97).” This reflects the two compromises attached to the reality of regime formation, that is, states participate in regimes that are politically beneficial to them or they must be brought down to agree based on the lowest common denominator of priorities. Yu refuted the legitimacy and cost-effectiveness of establishing an SCS regime as he sees treaties as more enforceable than informal arrangements. He doubts if parties to the envisioned regime are willing to share a part of their sovereignty as they beseech China and Taiwan in relation to SCS management. In the same vein, he challenged proponents of an SCS regime to prove that having such mechanisms would ensure lasting peace in the region rather than without them. Moreover, he explored the possible outcome of an SCS regime formation by citing the three paths to constructing international regimes according to Feld and Jordan: first is the contractarian track, where both the state and non-state actors stipulate goals; next is the evolutionary approach; and lastly is the piecemeal process, where parts and parcels of the international regime are only carried out to the extent of the participants’ consent. Due to the unpredictability of results from any of these tracks, Yu expressed conviction that SCS regime formation is an obstacle to SCS conflict management itself (Yu, 2015).

ASEAN and the SCS Conflict Management:

Capacity, Capability, and Competency

Over the years, ASEAN has released various instrumentalities elucidating its position toward the SCS dispute, foremost of which is the DOC signed by the 10-nation bloc and China in 2002. Encapsulated in the document is the mutual agreement to uphold the international law as embodied in the UN Charter, UNCLOS, and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, among others, to promote good neighborliness in East Asia by committing to undertake collaborative confidence-building activities. It is in this document that the vision for the formulation of the COC was set in stone (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). Nine years later, an eight-point Guidelines for the Implementation of the DOC was adopted during the ASEAN Summit in Indonesia in 2011. The document sought to amplify the adherence to the declaration despite its non-binding nature by requiring reporting on the progress of its implementation during the ASEAN-China Ministerial Meeting (ASEAN Secretariat, 2011). In time for the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the DOC, ASEAN and China reaffirmed their pledge to sustain the provisions of the document, pending the finalization of the COC (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022).

Another pertinent instrumentality ASEAN has released in relation to the SCS is the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which renewed the regional organization's perception of centrality in the macro-spherical region's order and grounded peacemaking through its choice channels of diplomatic interaction, notably the East Asian Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus, the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting (ADMM), among others (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

Looking into ASEAN as a multilateral structure, Limaye (2018) challenged the notion that ASEAN has been underperforming in unraveling the SCS entanglement for its intergovernmental design was never equipped to work as such. He assailed the centrality of the issue to the organization in five points: first, the controversy only concerns four out of ten members of the organization; second, the demographic weight of the co-claimants falls into the minority side (36 percent of the population, 30 percent of total GDP, 20 percent of territory, and 30 percent of total military spending); third, ASEAN was only embroiled due to the expansion of its membership; fourth, the co-claimant AMS exhibit conflict in recognizing each other's rights in the territory; and lastly, they have disjointed claims and actions in addressing China's. In contrast, he stated that the regional organization has shown increasing coherence in its behavior and in dealing with the issue (Limaye, 2018).

In his study, Agastia attempted to measure the effectiveness of Southeast Asian maritime security cooperation (MSC) by cataloging official data reports on maritime security cooperative activities from ASEAN-related organs. The data were then analyzed according to the analytical framework devised by the author in Haack's category of cooperation. MSC activities initiated by ASEAN were classified as "incidental" or "sustained" against being "dialogical" or "practical." The resulting data were then subjected to a thematic analysis narrowed down to the ARF, ADMM, and ADMM-Plus. The resulting narrative appeared to present the three ASEAN fora as more dialogical than practical in processing territorial issues, which could be indicative of willing participants to resort to minilateral approach in coming up with an agreement on MS issues such as the creation of the Malacca Tri-Patrol by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (Agastia, 2021).

Chheang's 2020 article sought to understand "minilateralism" within the confines of ASEAN, enumerating the dozens of economic and political-security structures that have been created among the AMS. In this regard, he defined it as an informal "functional cooperation on specific issues at the sub-regional level between countries or localities in a geographically defined area or region." He noted that most minilaterals in Southeast Asia were driven by external partners, including India, Japan, China, and the US. The author concluded that ASEAN minilaterals on both fronts proved complementary to the intergovernmental organization's objectives. However, only those created for specific non-traditional security issues such as counter-terrorism were assessed to be converging with the association's integration ambitions. The author suggested that future minilaterals should marshal their agenda according to the ASEAN Community blueprints. If deviation is inevitable, then the author proposes putting in the table the ASEAN Minus X formula (Chheang, 2020).

Lee-Brown (2018) defines minilaterals similarly to Chheang's, referring to them as "informal and more targeted initiatives intended to address "a specific threat, contingency, or security issue with a fewer (three to four) states sharing the same interest for resolving it within a finite period of time." He cited Sahashi's Three-Tier Approach in forging minilateral arrangements: first, establish strategic interactions; second, create a needs-based, practical security setup; third, complement weaknesses in regional multilateralism. The author also emphasized that an Asian-driven minilateralism would promote spoke-to-spoke dialogues rather than nurture the already existing asymmetrical diplomacy between a regional hegemon and the less-powerful states. Taking the example of the Quad and the trilateralism among Australia, India, and Japan, he stated that such an imperative could help in shaping a stronger Asian regionalism (Lee Brown, 2018).

Supporting this idea were Chubb and De Gurung, who in their respective studies suggest that the 10-nation bloc exploiting the benefits of the ASEAN minus X mechanism could be beneficial for both the co-claimant and the non-claimant AMS. Also, this method could aid ASEAN in clarifying its position toward the Chinese posture and the US re-pivot to the region (Chubb, 2020). De Gurung added that in this way, Vietnam could even draw the nonchalant Brunei Darussalam into leveraging the co-claimants' interest in the SCS (2018).

Assessing the Implications of the Vietnamese and Philippines SCS Strategies in Relation to the ASEAN WOCM

Evident from the foregoing literatures, Vietnam is marshaling a broad-ranged campaign to secure its claimed sovereign assets in the SCS on military, diplomatic, and economic fronts. Notably, it calibrates its SCS maneuvers to simultaneously respond to its three major diplomatic foci: first, engaging China; next, engaging the US; and third, ASEAN integration. Apparently, the AMS is able to manage vacillating between two antagonistic empires to protect its interests while maintaining attachment to its regional organization. Also learned from the above-cited review is the potential of Hanoi for regional leadership in the maritime security sector, noting its geopolitical and economic affluence and position among the said international actors.

Another important gleaning from the surveyed sources is the knowledge of the existing mediation regime, regardless of the awareness or consent among the AMS co-claimants or extra-regional entities involved in it. The praxis of ASEAN Way management of conflict has survived the test of several territorial frictions among its members, the Cambodian War, the Cold War, and the current SCS conundrum, even to a mixed reaction from the global community. Undeniably, the 10-nation bloc's

international relations conventions have played a part in the de-escalation of clashes in the contested maritime spaces.

Also supported in the literatures are the evaluation of Vietnam's performance relative to SCS conflict management and how it stands before its peer co-claimants such as the Philippines and Malaysia, and, to an extent, how it affects ASEAN collegial decisions and future diplomatic direction.

Moreover, zooming in on the Vietnam and Philippine SCS strategies and their relationship with the ASEAN WOCM, and how they impact constructing an international order around the disputed territory could provide an endogenous inspection of regime formation within the confines of the dictates of the institutional design and other factors, such as the unfinished COC. It will provide an insider-outsider perspective by ascertaining the country's, a peer co-claimant's, and the regional organization's interactions toward establishing order in the SCS. For these reasons, an assessment of the Vietnam-Philippine-ASEAN nexus's contributions to SCS conflict management is warranted.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative data analysis (QDA) design was employed in conducting this study. Through this lens, the study conducted a thematic analysis of the sampled literatures and interview results to identify emergent themes relevant to the study. The resulting data were then subjected to content analysis to address the research questions: (1) categorize the Vietnamese SCS strategies, (2) arrive at a comparison with a peer co-claimant's tactics, and (3) identify the reciprocal implications of the said strategies to ASEAN's WOCM.

Theorizing and Data Analysis in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research complements its quantitative counterpart in enabling a scientific understanding of the empirical world. Qualitative studies supply subjective access to the assumed reality by presenting the perception, experience, and observation of the researcher and the researched. Also, they extract the observable data from the experiences of the researched community through inductive sense-making to generate a theory that supplies a contextual explanation of the studied phenomenon. As for the purpose, they intend to provide multiple ways of understanding what is studied (Graue, 2015; Suter, 2012).

Defining qualitative research as such points to ascertaining its goal—to allow themes and patterns that enable understanding of the “whats” and “hows” of a problem to emerge from the typical sources of interviews, observations, and documents. In general, the qualitative research design can be classified into five categories:

phenomenology, case study, ethnography, narrative, and mixed methods. However, the constructivist nature of qualitative research offers flexibility for the researcher to configure the methodological paradigm of the study (Suter, 2012). Considering the objects of investigation, i.e., the sampled journal articles and interview transcripts, this paper adopted a qualitative data analysis (QDA) approach to allow the surfacing of comprehension of the Intra-ASEAN SCS strategies by equipping entailing research questions with plausible answers. A working definition of QDA was given by Flick accordingly:

Qualitative data analysis is the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it (2014).

Flick added that the method's meaning-making draws "subjective or social meanings" through rough and detailed analyses of the data from different textual sources to come up with generalizable statements (2014).

In accomplishing the research objectives, this study necessitated theorizing from qualitative data through theoretical development using general concepts. Such is carried out by assigning "sensitizing concepts" or imprecise references that inform or put the research questions in context (Kelle, 2014), which in this study's case is determined as "SCS strategies." To arrive at a typology of these SCS strategies, Kelle suggested that theoretical coding be utilized to determine the categories guiding sense-making. Whereas the three-tiered Grounded Theory mode of data codification is ideal, strict adherence to it is not prescribed, knowing that such should be implemented according to the purpose of the qualitative study (Kelle, 2014).

Elliot (2018), in her study, illuminated the practices in qualitative data analysis, quoting Creswell's argument on the need for coding: "Text data are dense data, and

it takes a long time to go through them and make sense of them. For her, conceptualizing coding is a decision-making process per se beyond what Richards and Richards simply define as “indexing” or designating meaning to a piece of data to identify its relevance to answering a question. In grasping the coding process, a requisite is to acquire a working knowledge of differentiating its elements—codes and categories. Codes are the labels attached to the basest unit of analysis, while categories, also called themes, are codes assembled as “broad units of information” providing a concept (Elliot, 2018).

In addition, Graue identified the four common key steps in implementing QDA: 1) data collection, which could be done through the conduct of an interview or observation; 2) data reduction, which comes in the form of extracting meaning from the data by assigning codes and categories; 3) data displays or organizing the emerging themes for analysis; and 4) conclusion drawing/verification, where the researcher finally presents the outcomes of the research process and defends its authenticity (2015).

Therefore, in framing its QDA model, this study modified grounded theory’s (GT) three-tier coding structure. Instead of conducting open coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding, the author employed two analytic methods—thematic analysis and content analysis. The preliminary data was subjected to the first analytic method in three cycles for the prevailing themes across the sample to arise. The results were then treated using the second analytic method, refining the data to correspond to the study objectives. Thematic mapping was used to aid in visualizing the coding developments. The entire coding process was rendered using Microsoft Excel software due to availability and budgetary constraints. To guide the theorizing of data,

Mahiwo's Meta-Nation State framework was harnessed. Additional details on the two analytic methods are discussed in the next sections of this chapter.

Research Instrument

This study employed questionnaires (see Appendices A, B, and C) in conducting its semi-structured interview part of data gathering. Since the three key informants (KI) represent different disciplines, the questions were designed to elicit their academic insights on the SCS issue against their background.

Sampling Method

The objective of this study was to use primary sources in the form of an interview with relevant key informants (KIs) on the topic as well as secondary sources such as academic articles available online using thematic and content analyses to study Vietnam's and the Philippines' SCS strategies in the context of ASEAN WOCM.

The parameters for qualifying written samples were as follows:

- a) clearly focuses on discussing related data on SCS strategies by Vietnam, ASEAN, and the Philippines in any part of the research,
- b) being published in print or digital versions after 2013, and
- c) available and can be accessed via online open sources.

KIs for the interview for the study were selected based on the following qualifications:

1. a Filipino scholar on SCS or ASEAN studies,
2. a reputable academician of Vietnamese descent specializing in Vietnamese studies, and

3. an established expert on SCS or ASEAN studies from a reputable international academic institution or organization.

Procedures for Data Collection

This study collated academic journal articles in English available on open online sources. For the interview, a virtual semi-structured interview guided by a questionnaire (see Appendices A, B, and C) was arranged upon confirmation by the interviewee with questions formulated based on the research questions.

Procedures for Data Analysis

Thematic analysis works toward bringing to light a theme or “‘patterned response or meaning’ that informs the research question.” Its flexibility in attuning to the requirements of a wide variety of qualitative studies makes it an appropriate approach for beginning researchers. It enables a profound yet easy-to-grasp procedure of analysis apt for capturing multiple perspectives, comparisons, and idiosyncratic sense-making. However, these attributes of thematic analysis are undervalued in contrast with other qualitative research traditions such as grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology due to the limited number of available literatures elucidating its rigorous application. To confront this limitation, a six-step iterative approach is employed to ensure the method’s credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity to the audit trail (Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

According to Braun and Clarke, there are six steps to effectively engage the inductive method in qualitative research (Kiger and Varpio, 2020; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). These steps are accordingly followed by the researcher to generate the needed data for this study.

1. Data Familiarization. This initial step required reading and re-reading the data set. Also, the researcher took notes from the data set to capture impressions and better orient himself with the materials.
2. Initial Code Generation. The researcher assigned codes (defined herein “as ‘[t]he most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon”) and developed a coding outline using Microsoft Word software following a deductive approach since the study is guided by Mahiwo’s Meta-Nation State analytical framework.
3. Theme Search. Codes were organized into themes according to the deductive approach or looking for a specific aspect of the data compatible with the model geared toward forming an analytic story. Both micro-and macro-thematic maps were produced as guides toward an analytical category.
4. Theme Review. A two-level analytical process was carried out in this step. In the first level, each theme was checked through a series of questions, ensuring the sufficiency of supporting data and thematic clarity, among others. At this point, codes were re-arranged and improved to suit the direction of the study. For the second level, the same procedure was implemented; however, the objective was to ensure a meaningful thematic fit to the entire data set. Revisions to the thematic maps were accordingly made at this point, preceded by further data familiarization, code re-generation, and theme search.

5. Theme Taxonomy. The results from the previous step were refined, and a final thematic map was rendered. The connections between the overarching theme and sub-themes were identified and included in the final report.
6. Report/manuscript production. Codes, data extracts, sub-themes, and themes were written to compose the analytical story, reflecting the actual and accurate contextual outcome of the analysis, devoid of the injection of interpretation by the researcher. The discussion of the result was further strengthened by literature references and supporting analysis.

Nowell et al. (2017) stated that the six steps of the method are iterative and reflective in nature, which facilitate a time-to-time audit of fit between the data, codes, and theme.

To validate the result of thematic analysis, the researcher subjected it to content analysis. This QDA method worked in a scientific way to draw “valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data” in studying a phenomenon (Bengtsson quoting Downe-Wamboldt, 2016). For this data triangulation process, the study followed the procedure prescribed by Bengtsson (2016), which is detailed as follows:

1. Decontextualization. Meaning units gleaned from the sample were labeled with codes in line with the analytical framework.
2. Re-contextualization. Samples were reviewed for consistency and correspondence with the research questions. The “dross” or meaning units unnecessary to the research direction are deleted.
3. Categorization. In this step extracted data were organized into heterogeneous themes.
4. Compilation. The final report was written by drawing realistic conclusions and counter-evaluated using the referenced literatures.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting the research, the author secured the consent of the KIs to be included in the semi-structured interview. They were contacted via email and were briefed on the research process as well as the recording of the interview for transcription. Anonymity was observed to respect their request for confidentiality. The KIs will be provided access to the publishable copy of this study for their reference.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

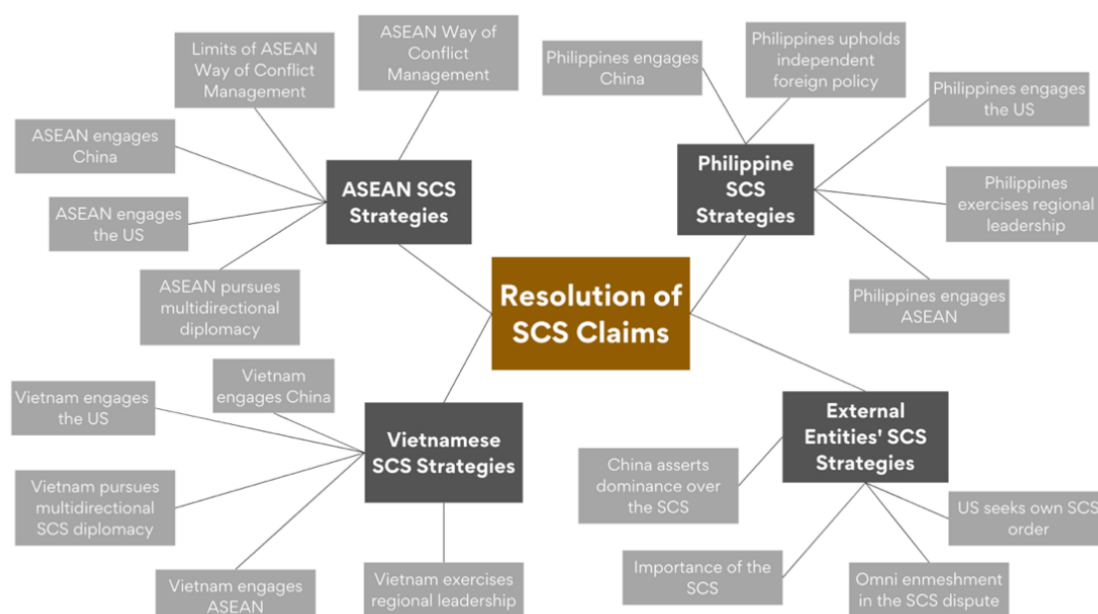
This chapter presents the results of the data-gathering procedure in two parts. First is the presentation of the emergent themes generated through thematic analysis, discussing both the outcomes of the two methods employed—interview and thematic coding. Results are shown in tabular format and coupled with representative extracts from the texts. The next part deals with triangulating such data for content analysis. Both tiers of data treatment are presented in this chapter in light of the research questions, with the subsequent analysis supported by interpretation based on the reviewed literature. Provided at the end of this chapter are the summary, discussion of findings per research question, and the comprising sub-questions.

Presentation of Data

The secondary source data pool is composed of 23 SCS dispute-focused academic journals derived from open access sources published in 2013 and beyond. They are subsequently thematically coded on a sentence or paragraph basis, parsing the units of analysis (UoA) depending on the scope of the theme's meaning. The review of literature is based on a sample of articles classified by subject and scope as stated in the abstracts. The articles deal with related issues in the ASEAN, seven (7); China, four (4); the Philippines, five (5); the US, five (5), and Vietnam, four (4). True to the iterative nature of thematic coding, the author treated the samples at three intervals as recorded in tables using MS Word and MS Excel to further refine and capture the meaning of the UoA while addressing the need to validate the data.

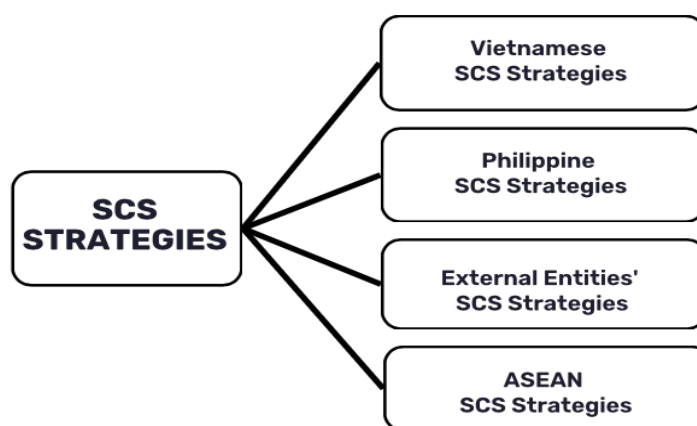
For the primary source, three (3) KIs were tapped for this study through a virtual interview: the first is a Filipino scholar on SCS or ASEAN studies; second, a reputable academicians of Vietnamese descent specializing in Vietnamese studies; and third, an established expert on SCS or ASEANOLOGY from a reputable international academic institution or organization. The interview was based on a set of open-ended questions formulated and adjusted by the author according to the area of expertise of the KI. Having transcribed the recording into text, the author then processed the interview data by way of thematic analysis. Likewise, the results have been recorded in tables using MS Word and MS Excel, which both helped in organizing theme extraction from the data. To better establish the reliability of the collected data, the study proceeds to the second layer of its two-tiered analysis—content analysis. From here, the results from thematic analysis are triangulated through content analysis. It is in this phase that the results are compared with the literatures reviewed in Chapter 2 as a reliability test.

Figure 4. Final thematic map
Source: Prepared by the author



Across both methods of data gathering, four major themes emerged from the resulting thematic coding. In alphabetical order, these are: (1) ASEAN SCS Strategies, (2) External Entities' SCS Strategies, (3) Philippine SCS Strategies, and (4) Vietnamese SCS Strategies.

Figure 5. Major themes across the sample
Source: Prepared by the author



The major themes generated by the thematic coding guided by the Meta-Nation State framework affirmed the state and the supra-state entities as the key players in the Vietnam-Philippine-ASEAN SCS nexus. The paradigm distinguishes the intra-national, national, and supra-national actors, and the dyadic interactions between the two of them give rise to “multi-level, multi-player participation and in multi-dimensional dynamics” in international relations. However, this paper delimits focus to state-to-state and state-to-supra-state loci of interactions as the scope of the study permits (n.d. a; n.d. b; 2014; 2015).

Coding the sampled journals and interview transcripts revealed the following themes and sub-themes presented as follows to correspond with the research objectives:

1. Vietnamese Strategies

a. Thematic coding results

Table 1

Sub-themes under the Theme Vietnamese SCS Strategies

Vietnamese SCS Strategies
Vietnam engages China
Vietnam engages the US
Vietnam pursues multidirectional SCS diplomacy
Vietnam exercises regional leadership
Vietnam engages ASEAN

Vietnam engages China refers to the formal or informal strategies implemented by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in dealing with China relative to the SCS dispute.

Vietnam bandwagons with China. *Economically, China has been Vietnam's largest trade partner since 2004. Despite the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, bilateral trade in 2021 continued to increase and amounted to more than \$165.8 billion at a 24.6% year-on-year rate. Vietnam has become China's sixth largest trade partner, while China continued to be Vietnam's second largest export market. China consumes a huge quantity of Vietnamese food and agricultural products which is estimated to be more than \$1 billion annually. Meanwhile China supplies the input materials and semi-finished goods for many manufacturing industries in Vietnam. In terms of investment, until March 2022 China's foreign direct investment (FDI) reached almost \$22 billion, which was ranked the seventh biggest source of foreign investment in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2022).*

Vietnam hedges toward China. *In the post-Cold War era, a third paradigm emerged in Vietnam's strategic approach to foreign policy. Rather than*

developing close relationships with uniquely Marxist–Leninist countries—as was Hanoi’s policy during the Cold War—Vietnam pursued a more flexible strategy of ‘cooperation and struggle’, a concept that began to appear in CPV foreign policy documents by 1994 (Hiep, 2013). In 2003, the CPV issued a resolution entitled ‘On defence of the homeland in the new situation’, which provided greater detail on the twin concepts of ‘objects of cooperation’ and ‘objects of struggle’ (Thayer, 2016). In this paradigm, Vietnam’s policy is to cooperate with all countries in areas of convergent interests, while struggling against any country that attempts to undermine Vietnam’s national interests (Thayer, 2016). Yet the two categories of ‘cooperation’ and ‘struggle’ are not mutually exclusive. Vietnam envisions its foreign policy toward China as one of both struggle and cooperation: struggling against China’s expansionist maritime goals while cooperating with China on economic development and other mutual interests (Phoung, 2019).

Vietnam balances against China. *Can these procurement and production activities be construed as Vietnam’s measures in response to China’s advancement into the SCS? As a matter of course, the government of Vietnam principally refrains from making comments that draw direct linkages between naval power enhancement and the SCS issue, so as not to incite China. However, at a press conference in January 2010, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung stressed that submarines were being purchased for modernizing Vietnam’s equipment associated with its economic growth, implying the need to defend Vietnam’s vast territorial waters. While Prime Minister Dung’s comments do not make direct reference to the SCS, they pertain to the SCS issue in a broad sense, and at the very least do not deny Vietnam’s goal of*

protecting its territorial rights and interests over the SCS. In January 2011, in an interview with Vietnam's leading newspaper Thanh nien, Deputy Defense Minister Nguyen Chi Vinh hinted at the linkage between armament and the SCS issue, saying, We do not assert the use of force or intimidation by force to other countries. However, neither can we hold talks empty-handed. We need to affirm that we have the adequate potential and determination to defend our fatherland in the case of an invasion. By doing so we will be able to sit at the negotiation table with confidence on an equal footing for the first time.¹³ It can be interpreted from these remarks that while armament cannot serve as a total deterrent against China, the Vietnamese government and military expect it will have some effect on defending the areas under Vietnam's effective control in the SCS, including demonstrating the state's determination to defend the areas (Shoji, 2015).

Vietnam engages the US refers to the formal or informal strategies implemented by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in dealing with the US relative to the SCS dispute.

Vietnam bandwagons with the US. *Besides the economic factors, the two countries' shared interests in the security realm make the US a strong partner of Vietnam. Deepening cooperation with the US is an effective way to enhance Vietnam's capacity in coping with a wide range of security challenges. In addition, successful Vietnam-US collaboration helped to bolster Vietnam's partnership with the middle powers, particularly with the EU, India, Japan, Australia, Republic of Korea and New Zealand. As a result, Vietnam can garner support of the like-minded partners in addressing numerous conventional and non- conventional security issues. Since the beginning of Vietnam's Renovation*

policy, one of the highest priorities of Vietnam is to preserve a peaceful and stable strategic environment for development. Therefore, Vietnam attached great importance to the support of partners in promoting peaceful solution of disputes in the SCS, freedom and safety of navigation and overflight, the adherence to international law and existing legal instruments, in particular the UNCLOS 1982. The US and the middle powers are critical partners of Vietnam in strengthening the capacity of the coast guard, law enforcement and maritime domain awareness (Nguyen, 2019).

Vietnam hedges toward the US. *Fourth, many Vietnamese scholars have supported the idea that the establishment of a strategic partnership with the US has to be considered carefully, and it is not urgent at this moment. They mostly think that the current policies of Vietnam toward the US and China are rational and wise. On the one hand, the US is very important to many Southeast Asian countries, which are having the territorial disputes with China over the East Sea. The US drastic deployment of the Indo-Pacific Strategy has helped restrain the Chinese aggressiveness and changed their policies in the region. Although the more drastic actions of the US may create risks for Vietnam's security environment, their positive impacts are much greater. Vietnam's attitude in supporting the US principles in the Indo-Pacific Strategy is completely appropriate in the current context. On the other hand, China is the US strong competitor and will sooner or later become a big power in the region. Given this view, Vietnam needs the US supports in the short run, but also has to consider the rise of China in the long run in order to have appropriate policies. Thus, the establishment of a strategic partnership with the US has to be considered*

seriously and cautiously by the Vietnamese leadership (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2021).

Vietnam engages ASEAN refers to the formal or informal strategies implemented by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in dealing with the regional organization relative to the SCS dispute.

Vietnam will work closely with ASEAN countries and the middle powers to promote an effective and inclusive multilateralism at regional and global levels. In the upcoming decade, the ASEAN-led institutions, APEC and ASEM will be the main regional mechanisms for Vietnam to advance its interests. At the same time, Vietnam will strive for effective collaboration in dealing with the pressing global issues through a number of FTAs, the global economic institutions such as ADB, WB, IMF and the UN system. By doing so, Vietnam seeks mutually beneficial cooperation which can reduce the risks caused by the major powers' contestation (Nguyen, 2019).

Vietnam exercises regional leadership refers to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's effort to initiate actions with co-claimants and other international actors in managing the SCS conflict.

Vietnam prepares maritime defense. *Vietnam began to modernize its armed forces soon after Doi Moi was initiated, and these efforts were accelerated in the mid-1990s due to China's increasing assertiveness in the SCS. In May 1995 CPV General Secretary Do Muoi called for the modernization of the country's navy and stated that we must reinforce our defense capacity to defend our sovereignty, national interests and natural marine resources, while at the same time building a maritime economy." Since then, Vietnam's military*

modernization programme has made substantial progress, particularly in terms of naval power (Le, 2013).

Vietnam's energy investment in the SCS. *At the meeting, External Affairs Minister Krishna reportedly communicated to Foreign Minister Minh that India intended to implement the joint development project in the SCS between Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited and PetroVietnam, despite China's strong protests. Additionally, President Sang visited India in October 2011, at a timing almost coinciding with the visit to China by General Secretary Trong of the Communist Party of Vietnam. In the joint declaration released on the occasion of the President's visit to India, the two countries referred to the peaceful resolution of the SCS issue and confirmed the signing of a memorandum of understanding regarding joint development in these waters. Deputy Defense Minister Vinh accompanied President Sang on his visit to India, and held a meeting with Defense Secretary Sharma of India. At the meeting, the two countries agreed to promote cooperation between their defense authorities (Shoji, 2015).*

Vietnam pursues multidirectional SCS diplomacy refers to the strategies implemented by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to diversify its foreign relations to maximize gains and cope with the impact of a multipolar world order.

At strategic levels, experts tend to agree that Vietnam's diplomacy has since Doi Moi been more pragmatic and role of ideology has declined (Chapman, 2017; Dosch and Tuan, 2004; Hiep, 2018; Quy, 2019; Thayer, 2016; Trung, 2017; Tung and Tu, 2018). Hiep (2018) notes that Vietnam's foreign policy stresses the principles of independence, peace, cooperation and development based on international law, equity, mutual benefit. In practice, Hanoi pursues

firm position against China in the SCS and rapprochement with the US. In a similar vein, Chapman (2017) argues that the core interests of Vietnam namely maintaining peace and stability, protecting sovereignty and independence, and promoting position in the international arena remain unchanged since Doi Moi. Vietnam's main objective in foreign relations is to reduce uncertainty in the external environment while benefiting from deepening its process of integration into the world. In order to achieve this objective, Vietnam pursues a multidirectional foreign policy to enhance its leverage against potential threats. This allows Vietnam to avoid falling into either camp of balancing or bandwagoning with great powers (Tuan, Binh, and Huong, 2020).

Vietnam upholds independent foreign policy. *As hedging requires substantial linkages with foreign partners and international institutions, Vietnam's pursuit of this strategy would have been impossible if the country had not successfully diversified and multilateralized its foreign relations in the early 1990s. Therefore, changes in Vietnam's foreign policy played a crucial part in the formulation and operationalization of its hedging strategy. At the same time, shifts in regional geopolitics over the last few decades have also facilitated Vietnam's hedging strategy. Specifically, post-Cold War trends, such as China's rise and regional wariness about its growing power, the emergence of ASEAN as the key broker of multilateral security arrangements, the renewed interest and involvement of external powers in the region, and the likely future intensification of strategic rivalry between the US and China, have all been favorable to Vietnam's efforts to deepen its linkages with other countries and strengthen the external foundations of its*

hedging strategy vis-a-vis China. Without these external conditions, the strategy would not have been a viable option for Vietnam (Le, 2013).

Vietnam engages Japan. *During Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide's visit to Vietnam in October 2020, the two sides agreed to step up defense and security cooperation and reached an agreement allowing Japan to export defense equipment and technology to Vietnam. More importantly, Suga stated that Vietnam was crucial to achieving our vision of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and our valuable partner, suggesting that Japan and the U.S. share a perception of Vietnam's role in carrying out their Indo-Pacific strategies. Both countries could thus seek to enlist Vietnam in a Quad plus arrangement adding it to their relationship with Australia and India. While wary of Beijing's reactions, Vietnam may consider unofficially joining such an arrangement and participating in selected Quad initiatives to counterbalance China's pressures in the SCS. That said, Japan's constitutional constraints and its own territorial disputes with China in the East China Sea, which are higher on Tokyo's list of priorities, may distract it from cooperation with Vietnam (ICG, 2021).*

Vietnam engages India. *India and Vietnam established their strategic partnership in 2007, with defense co-operation an important pillar thereof. India has helped train Vietnamese submarine crews since 2013 and, in May 2015, the two countries signed a Joint Vision Statement on Defence Cooperation for the period 2015-2020, signaling commitment to greater collaboration; they anticipate conclusion of a second statement for 2021- 2025. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in September 2016, he offered a credit line of \$500 million for Vietnam to procure arms and defense equipment from India. The two countries have been discussing India's sale of BrahMos anti- ship*

cruise missiles to Vietnam since 2014. Although the deal has not been sealed, it remains a possibility given that the two countries share strategic interests in dealing with China, with which both have territorial disputes. In December 2020, Delhi and Vietnam issued a joint vision statement that pledged enhanced military-to-military exchanges, training and capacity-building programs (ICG, 2021).

Vietnam engages Russia. *Vietnam procures primarily submarines and frigates from Russia. In December 2009, Vietnam signed an agreement with Russia to purchase six Kilo-class submarines. The first and second submarines which arrived at the Cam Ranh Naval Base in January and March 2014, respectively, were commissioned in April 2014. The third and fourth submarines which arrived in January and June 2015 were commissioned in August 2015. The procurement process is moving ahead steadily, with the fifth submarine delivered in February 2016. Additionally, two Gepard-class frigates were commissioned in 2011, and two frigates whose purchase agreement was signed in late 2011 are scheduled for delivery in 2017. Further, in January 2012, the Hong Ha Shipyard under the Ministry of National Defense of Vietnam delivered the first indigenous patrol vessel to the Navy. This vessel was made with Russian assistance, based on Russia's Svetlyak- class patrol vessel (Shoji, 2015).*

Vietnam promotes non-militarized SCS. *Vietnam demonstrated particularly strong opposition to the confrontation over the oil rig, distinctly different from its responses to the series of troubles occurring at sea or diplomatic exchanges of criticisms in the wake of the recently reignited SCS issue. Vietnam's strong resistance was manifested in its dispatch of many patrol ships, surveillance*

ships and fishing boats to the scene as a show of strong resistance to China's drilling, and extensive advocacy through the release of photographs and video clips showing the situation of the collisions with China's vessels. Moreover, the country permitted anti-China demonstrations inside and outside the country, and seemingly encouraged demonstrations outside the country. Also notable is the unusually severe tone of the remarks by the Communist Party of Vietnam, which has its own connections with the Communist Party of China and has functioned as a stabilizing mechanism between the two countries. The report of the 9th Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam issued on May 14 declared that the country opposed China's drilling, that it would work toward the suspension of the drilling and that the whole party, all people and the whole Vietnam People's Army would make collective efforts in order to defend the country's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity while relying on peaceful means (Shoji, 2015).

b. Interview results

Table 2

Interview Sub-themes under the Theme Vietnamese SCS Strategies

Vietnamese SCS Strategies
Vietnam engages China
Vietnam engages the US
Vietnam pursues multidirectional SCS diplomacy
Vietnam exercises regional leadership
Vietnam engages ASEAN

Vietnam engages ASEAN

KI No. 2. *Not only Vietnam but other countries in the Southeast Asia including the Philippines, Malaysia and some other countries that have interest in the*

SCS and those with conflict with China. On SCS, we need come of multilateral organization, not only bilateral setups. We need to have the association with 10 nations to air their issues on the SCS and to solve the problem with multilateral mechanisms through international law [specifically the UNCLOS 1982].

KI No. 3. *So, the diversification is not just to countries, but they joined ASEAN, the ADMM, the ARF, the EAS to discuss the issues of SCS. They do that because they prefer to have more friends than enemies is another expression Vietnam has. It gives them cover and legitimacy in the international community. Vietnam on many areas is on preparation on UN Peacekeeping mission. A proof of what I am saying is that Vietnam had been elected twice in the UN Security Council. The unanimous choice of Asian peers and overwhelming vote by other. Vietnam has high international stature. So, the ASEAN is an insulation. You got to grab off a hot wire in the hand you might get hurt. But if you grab a glove, you cannot stop the electricity, but it prevents the worst damage to you. It is like you hanker down as strategy with ASEAN. You are trying to prevent them from siding with China to maintain balance.*

Vietnam engages China

KI No. 2. *China has a lot of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. These are kind of Chinese initiatives to promote cooperation with other countries in Southeast Asia especially mutual cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. China has lot of interest and has most battle in the sea with Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia, and has border with Vietnam and Laos. China is our partner for development and the US as an actor for peace and stability in East Asia.*

KI No. 3. *When the 2014 incident occurred, Vietnam did not allow any of its military ship to go near the area, to be around. There was such an asymmetry of power. It is like Oh, we are not going to war with China. You have to grit and bear it as much as possible. In [Philippines'] case, they physically occupy the waters and take the fish. And Vietnam is smart enough, saying, Yes, we do not like them here. But they will go home anyways. We are going to manage these relations. We do not go kicking them in the shins because they will punch us in the face. It is a difficult situation that they keep manipulating for years coming back and forth. They go to the US, saying that they got China first and improve our relations. And got a phone call from Biden, so that got China saying, Oh, what is Vietnam doing?*

Vietnam engages the US

KI No. 3. *They worry that there's polarization in the country and therefore the trust is he wrote it because the guy can't deliver. You know have Americans that on the right that want us not fund Ukraine and so if you're not why would why we put ourselves put our eggs in the American basket only to have him drop it drop it on the ground when it suited them? If they could improve relations with China so they're always constraints that way but go up back, you know Vietnamese require foreigners to ask permission to enter into exclusive economic zones so the US conducted freedom of navigation operations now Vietnam [says] we don't object as long as it contributes to regional security. Stay, come on American Navy. Best stay in the region. Keep sailing here, please but we can't.*

Vietnam exercises regional leadership

KI No. 2. *Two countries that stand side by side, cooperate and have each other to solve problems in the SCS, and for both countries interests and sovereignty for the reason of development. The JMSU¹ is not to cooperate with China but to cooperate with countries to more solutions to work with China and come to finalize the COC not only to protect Vietnamese but also Philippine maritime territories.*

KI No. 3. *When it is Vietnam's time to lead the ADMM Plus, the chief of naval said that Vietnam has made many proposals to call for cooperation, to break ground, and not to make more fighting. It moved ASEAN to greater calls for cooperation. Particularly, if you are the chair and Vietnam's case in particular held another office, the UN Security Council, you have a lot more influence internationally. The chairmanship is only for a year, but you can set the agenda for the future in a momentum. When the next year comes in, it is expected that they are to address the issues left by the previous chair. So, Vietnam can use it as a mechanism as well.*

Vietnam pursues multidirectional SCS diplomacy

KI No. 2. *Both countries can. But China is directly involved in the SCS. And US is an actor. Somehow the two countries, both countries continue to have influence in the region. For Vietnam, its position is strategically important, that is why China, and the US wants to be involved. I expect that China and the US as actors to contribute to peace and stability in the SCS. I cannot speak about what China can contribute to other countries because it is now the second most*

¹ JMSU stands for the aborted 2005 Tripartite Agreement on Joint Maritime Seismic Agreement among China, the Philippines, and Vietnam on SCS energy exploration.

powerful country with the US as the most powerful, which makes them responsible in maintaining peace and stability.

KI No. 3. *But then just talking about the war with China is like opening a can of worms. We have the war in Ukraine, the Russian and American competition, which makes the simple China-Vietnam relations much more complicated. But diversification, multilateralization, struggle, and cooperation express actively and proactively joining international organizations as many as it can, the TPP because Vietnam's economy is growing to moving to lower middle-income status as it wants to become a modern economy. Vietnam is a case that manages its relationship. The border is no longer a cause for confrontation.*

2. Comparison between the Vietnamese and Philippines SCS Strategies

a. Thematic Coding Results

Table 3

Thematic Coding Sub-themes under the Theme Philippine SCS Strategies

Philippine SCS Strategies
Philippines engages China
Philippines upholds independent foreign policy
Philippines engages the US
Philippines exercises regional leadership
Philippines engages ASEAN

Philippines engages China refers to the formal or informal strategies implemented by the Republic of the Philippines in dealing with China relative to the SCS dispute.

Philippines bandwagons with China. *First, in the process of interaction between China and the Philippines in the complex human and maritime relations, promoting the harmonious coexistence of geopolitical relations in the SCS with the win-win cooperation in economic and trade relations. China*

should continue to strengthen its dialogue and cooperation with the Philippines in the low political sphere. China's One Belt, One Road initiative should dovetail with the Philippines' Build It Big program, specifically including the development of civilization and cooperation in marine scientific research, education, environmental protection, etc., try to develop maritime smart tourism cooperation with the Philippines in the post-epidemic era, and continue to promote maritime fisheries cooperation with the Philippines. The positive effects of interaction and integration in the low political sphere will weaken the sharp conflicts in the high political sphere, thereby reducing the Philippines' perception of threat to China and weakening the confrontational behavior in the hedging strategy (Han, 2023).

Philippines hedges toward China. *In the SCS, the Philippines hedge against China has become a strategic behavior around people and the sea, whose interaction constitutes the human–ocean regional system. With the development of the modern law of the sea and changes in the international system, the corresponding manifestations under different attributes of the system are changing in complexity. This is driving the Philippines to respond to the problems arising in the SCS dispute by hedging against China. (Han, 2023).*

Philippines balances against China. *In late July 2011, the Philippines brought its case against China to the ASEAN expecting that association could persuade this emergent power to accept a more binding COC in the SCS. The Philippines thought that a binding ASEAN– China COC would prevent the People's Liberation Army from building military outposts on the islets and shoals and taking provocative actions against the other claimant states. The idea for the ASEAN–China COC originated on 2 September 2002 after the two*

sides signed the Declaration on the Code of Conduct (DOC) for the Parties in the SCS. The DOC is a political statement of broad principles of behavior aimed to stabilize the situation in the SCS and avoid the accidental outbreak of conflict in the disputed areas (De Castro, 2020).

Philippines engages the US refers to the formal or informal strategies implemented by the Republic of the Philippines in dealing with the US relative to the SCS dispute.

Philippines bandwagon with the US. *In any case, the Philippines is clearly pleased that its efforts to engage the US on the SCS issue have been successful. Following the USS Lassen episode in the Spratly Islands, Philippines President Aquino told a forum hosted by the Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines on 27 October that he had ‘no issue’ with the US move, and that he believed ‘every- body would welcome a balance of power’ in the SCS (Southgate and Kho quoting Sabillo, 2016).*

Philippines hedges toward the US. *Given this security environment, the country’s limited military capabilities and diplomatic gravitas are no match. Our default policy in the past has been to rely on the Philippines–US Mutual Defense Treaty to buttress our weaknesses. However, the current administration’s erstwhile independent foreign policy posture and its transactional approach to the Philippines–US alliance have weakened its utility as a counterfoil to China’s aggressive posturing in the SCS. Juxtaposing these situations with the seemingly effective influence operations by China show indicative inroads in critical institutions of the country (Ong and Bandong, 2022).*

Philippines engages ASEAN refers to the formal or informal strategies implemented by the Republic of the Philippines in dealing with the regional organization relative to the SCS dispute.

In late July 2011, the Philippines brought its case against China to the ASEAN expecting that association could persuade this emergent power to accept a more binding COC in the SCS. The Philippines thought that a binding ASEAN–China COC would prevent the People’s Liberation Army from building military outposts on the islets and shoals and taking provocative actions against the other claimant states. The idea for the ASEAN–China COC originated on 2 September 2002 after the two sides signed the DOC for the Parties in the SCS. The DOC is a political statement of broad principles of behavior aimed to stabilize the situation in the SCS and avoid the accidental outbreak of conflict in the disputed areas (De Castro, 2020).

Philippines upholds independent foreign policy refers to the Republic of the Philippines’ efforts to prioritize domestic interests in the face of pressures from international actors.

Notwithstanding that the PCA has no enforcement capability, the decision bolsters international public opinion and calls for a rules-based regime in the contested waters. It implies that neither military muscle nor sheer stubbornness should be the measure in determining the entitlements of any claimant state in the SCS or elsewhere. While indeed major powers tend to flaunt unfavorable international court rulings, experience would show as in the case of the US v. Nicaragua, the powerful actor in denial can still change its mind in time (Naval, 2020).

Impact of Tribunal arbitration. *Although the Philippines' action may initially have been a source of division and consternation within ASEAN, it has also served to heighten interest in, or at least attention to, processes based on the rule of law. Since Manila's submission in 2013, other states such as Vietnam have expressed greater interest in arbitration as a course of action. Representatives in Indonesia, which is not a claimant, have also expressed interest in legal proceedings to clarify the area of the Natuna Islands if dialogue fails (Ba, 2016).*

Philippines exercises regional leadership refers to the Republic of the Philippines' effort to initiate actions with co-claimants and other international actors in managing the SCS conflict.

Captain Dianne Despi opines that the Philippines is more of a match rather than a fire—it could start the discussions on certain issues and be involved in the conceptualization phase of the proposed solutions. It is in a position not only to solve its own security problems but also to contribute to the addressing of the larger issues in the region, including the stability of the region since it has the capability to initiate issues in the ASEAN agenda. As an example, during the presidency of Benigno Aquino III, he had been active in putting forward its interests with respect to the SCS before ASEAN. In one of his statements, President Aquino thinks that ASEAN should not allow any country, no matter how powerful, to claim an entire sea as its own and to use force or the threat thereof in asserting such a claim, indicating a prescriptive approach in addressing the situation in the SCS and, not surprisingly, reflects the Philippine position on the issue. His foreign affairs secretary, Albert del Rosario, even urged ASEAN in the 2015 ASEAN Summit to stand up for what is right

pertaining to what ASEAN should do in response to China's actions in the SCS. Although these calls have not translated to significant progress in addressing the issue, they nevertheless illustrate the capability and willingness of the Philippine government to put the SCS dispute at the top of the agenda of major ASEAN meetings. The challenge, however, is how to establish and sustain institutionalized rules in order for it to produce tangible and more concrete cooperation mechanisms. Despi, however, believes that this could be addressed by a combination of coordination between government agencies, cooperation from the private sector, and the existence of feedback mechanisms (Ong and Bandong, 2022).

b. Interview Results

Table 4

Interview Sub-themes under the Theme Philippine SCS Strategies

Philippine SCS Strategies
Philippines engages China
Philippines engages the US
Philippines engages ASEAN
Philippines upholds independent foreign policy
Philippines exercises regional leadership

Philippines engages China

KI No. 1. *Well, because part of mechanism of expanding our defense and the horizon of the pipelines of the AFP modernization program, you have to build your maximum deterrence in order for you to defend your maritime entitlement. Part of this is to be ambitious. Our neighbors in SEA even Myanmar, which is a poor country has a submarine. Why won't the Philippine have one when the Philippines is an archipelagic country. In other words, we are preparing our armed forces for external defense that is why we have to strengthen our*

Philippine Navy. Buying a submarine will boost our defense. I guess we are on the right track that the government is trying to provide is playing the idea of naval diplomacy. Because ultimately even if we have one against China's expanded capability, it represents our deterrence, it represents our fighting spirits. Also, it is symbolic of our military modernization.

Philippines engages the US

KI No. 1. *China has the upper hand. If it backs out of cooperating, then the other countries can't do anything. We have to voice out our concerns but ultimately, but China will have the last say. China is very exclusive. It only wants the co-claimants and those resident powers in the SCS. And they don't want the external powers. Even if the US is voicing out freedom of navigation.*

KI No. 3. *Now it seems that the Philippines by giving publicity, by sending ships, setting buoys, talking to the US for joint patrol and with Japan and other countries. It seems that Vietnam is prevented by its Three No's to cooperating to that extent. But its coastguard and military are stronger than the Philippines'. But Philippines is building up.*

Philippines engages ASEAN

KI No. 1. *We have to hedge but we have a new role as a middle power. As a middle power, we have to broker and to prevent any eventuality or war. Because that is the role of the middle power that is to be a peacemaker, a bridge, a bridge.*

Philippines upholds independent foreign policy

KI No. 1. *The Philippines is currently doing a maritime trilateral exercise. But I think we cannot escape the Sino-American competition because ultimately, they are two superpowers who are bent on proving who is the better leader. We*

don't know if China can retain its power, I mean to retain its power or China can beat the US in succeeding years to come. But ultimately part of multilateralism, we are building network not only with the US but with other like-minded nations like Japan and the Quad. That's part of the game, expanding your alliance and network. Let's see how this goes as China is the white elephant in the room. We cannot evade China. And China is an aggressive leader.

KI No. 2. *I think the Philippines is changing perspective toward the SCS issue. Before 2016, Philippine government has conflict with China in the SCS issue that it has won the tribunal arbitration on the territory on SCS on Philippine authority. After that, you have no maritime conflicts with China. For Vietnam, we have good relationship with China on many aspects but throughout our history, we want to protect our maritime territory. That's why there is the difference between the Philippines and Vietnam in the conflict in the SCS. Vietnam is consistent with our perspective, our standpoint to protect our maritime territory and problem peacefully and understanding mechanisms with other countries involved.*

KI No. 3. *The strategy is that the Philippines has a major ally; Vietnam is stronger internally, militarily than the Philippines, but the Philippines is slowly addressing that problem. But neither country is never ever going to be taking we can't... So, you know when you start looking at that asymmetry of power but that's getting back to, you know, you're looking at the strategies Philippines is operating more from an alliance strategy.*

Philippines exercises regional leadership

KI No. 1. *So, in terms of the complexity, we have a changing tide from warm relations during the time of PNoy, our pivot to China during the time of Duterte,*

and now we have the neutral or stance of neutrality under the Marcos administration. But we are not closing our doors to China. We are still talking to them, thinking that perhaps negotiation with China some of our maritime territories.

KI No. 2. *For the Philippine, before Duterte's, you were quite straightforward on the issues. Under Duterte, the conflict has been lost in existence. Under Marcos, there has been forward to solve the problem, similar to the government under Aquino.*

KI No. 3. *Duterte was there would be no confrontation. The sky would collapse. But with Marcos, the Philippine can be so confident on its position. I have been to over hundred conferences in the last ten years on the SCS and no one can get the 200 fishing boats out of the Philippine water without causing a war, without escalating it. That's how you manage it. The practicality. The two coordinated their strategy because they share the same concern, but they need to get together and solve under the international law their own conflicting claims or when UNCLOS says you can't do that they enter an arrangement of practical nature.*

3. Implications of ASEAN WOCM-Vietnamese and Philippine SCS Strategies

and vice versa

a. ASEAN SCS Strategies

i. Thematic Coding Results

Table 5

Thematic Coding Sub-themes under the Theme ASEAN SCS Strategies

ASEAN SCS Strategies
ASEAN Way of Conflict Management
Limits of ASEAN Way of Conflict Management
ASEAN engages China

Creating mechanisms for cooperation. *The AOIP envisions the Asia-Pacific and Indian Oceans not as contiguous territorial space but rather as closely integrated and inter-connected region. It stresses the ASEAN's comprehensive security approach through joint undertakings in maritime co-operation, connectivity, sustainable development goals, and other areas of collaboration (De Castro, quoting Acharya, 2020).*

Commitment to rules-based order. *For ASEAN states, the COC process represents a complex commitment to creating a rules-based, as opposed to power-based, regional order. It also allows flexibility as states search for a mutually acceptable solution (Ba, 2016).*

Fostering non-militarized confrontations. *Similarly, on May 13 [, 2014], the Chairman's Statement of the ASEAN Summit held on May 11 was released, expressing the serious concerns of the ASEAN leaders. Subsequently, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) was held on May 20, whose joint declaration calls for self- restraint by relevant nations and enshrines the strengthening of confidence-building measures using hotlines (Shoji, 2015).*

Limits of ASEAN Way of Conflict Management refers to the challenges besetting adherence to the AWCM in dealing with the maritime territorial contestation.

AWCM impacts ASEAN Centrality. *ASEAN also has had difficulty asserting its centrality in dealing with China. China claims 'indisputable sovereignty' over most of the SCS, and insists that these disputes be settled bilaterally by the countries directly concerned. This has created dynamic tensions in ASEAN-China relations (Thayer, 2013).*

China exerts influence over ASEAN. *However, Cambodia's foreign minister Hor Nam Hong, as ASEAN chair, blocked any mention of the dispute, claiming that these were bilateral issues and should therefore not be included (ibid.). At the November East Asian Summit, also held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and China once again tried to neutralize debate over the SCS dispute. Chairing the Summit once more, Cambodia unilaterally announced that ASEAN had agreed with China that 'they would not internationalize the SCS', and focus instead on 'the existing ASEAN-China mechanisms' (Southgate and Kho quoting Bland, 2016). [Change code]*

US-China competition impacts AWCM. *However, [ASEAN's] post-Cold War strategic compact that enabled this exceptional development has considerably weakened in the face of growing rivalry among the Great Powers, which has led to pressures o fomented disunity following the end delayed or deferred; first thanks to China's adherence to Chinese paramount leader its bide our time strategy and its "charm offensive" toward Southeast Asia, and by America's preoccupation with the so-called global war on terrorism (Tan, 2017).*

ASEAN engages China pertains to the regional organization's strategic engagement with its neighbor in the north relative to the SCS dispute. Engagement is understood in this foreign policy context as a range of interaction/s undertaken by a state with another state or the international community. Engagement could come in the form of bandwagoning (alignment), counterbalancing (contradiction), or hedging (diversification) toward a state or international relations actor.

ASEAN bandwagons with China. *With China becoming a major naval power in the region, and the Southeast Asian countries' biggest trading partner and most important official development assistance (ODA) donor because of the*

BRI, the 2022 ASEAN–China COC will give China a free hand in establishing a Sino-centric regional order in Southeast Asia (De Castro, 2020).

ASEAN hedges toward China. *ASEAN does not officially embrace the ASEAN-China CCD, but nor has it rejected the concept either. ASEAN has accommodated certain elements of China's grand strategy toward the region, especially in terms of form (Hoang, 2019).*

ASEAN balances against China. *Instead of ASEAN's norms socializing China, or enhancing regional unity, China has succeeded in dividing the ASEAN states and advancing its position in the South China Sea. Significantly, in 2012, the ASEAN states were unable to reach an agreement on the South China Sea, and failed to issue a joint communiqué for the first time in its history (Zhang, 2015, p. 74). More importantly, ASEAN's maritime sovereignty continues to be violated by China (International Crisis Group, 2012). To counter this, regional states have increasingly sought external power security guarantees, most notably from the United States (Tan, 2011, p. 149). This leads us to examine other perspectives to explain ASEAN's record on regional autonomy. (Southgate and Kho quoting Zhang et al., 2016).*

Shaping ASEAN-China Relations. *Second, strengthening the construction of the regulatory system of governance between China and ASEAN in the SCS is an institutional guarantee to reduce the sensitivity and complexity of the human–ocean regional system in the SCS. We should firmly promote the negotiation of the Code of Conduct for Parties in the SCS (Han, 2023).*

ASEAN engages the US denotes the strategic interactions by the regional organization with the US relative to the SCS dispute.

ASEAN balances against the US. *In a survey conducted by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS) in 2017, 54.3 per cent of the Southeast Asian respondents saw the US as undependable as an ally or partner. In a follow-up survey in December 2018, this negative view increased, with 68.1 per cent feeling unsure of or having little confidence or no confidence in America’s reliability as a strategic partner and provider of regional security, and 69 per cent believing that America’s level of engagement under the Trump administration has decreased or decreased substantially (Hoang, 2019)*

Shaping ASEAN-US Relations. *The US can also be instrumental in assisting ASEAN states in building up their own defensive capabilities. This can be done through programs designed to assist countries in further developing their security forces, such as the Maritime Security Initiative or International Military Education and Training (IMET) (McLaughlin, 2019).*

ASEAN pursues multidirectional diplomacy indicates the regional organization’s entering into diversified relationships with state and international actors to maximize the benefits and safety nets of a multipolar world order.

ASEAN hedges toward the US and China. *[A] vision statement from ASEAN released two weeks before the U.S. State Department statement has reaffirmed ASEAN’s commitment to finish the COC in the SCS. In the same vision statement, ASEAN also emphasized the importance of non-militarization and self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes. Moreover, ASEAN member states would understandably display hesitation on this matter since China has been the region’s largest trading partner and therefore would not want to compromise their economic activities (Ong and Bandong, 2022).*

ASEAN engages other Asian powers. *The BRI may grab media headlines but Japan still holds the largest value of infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia at US\$367 billion, ahead of China at US\$255 billion, according to the latest data by Fitch Solutions. ASEAN also looks further westward through its Indo-Pacific outlook adopted at the 34th ASEAN Summit in June 2019 despite China's misgivings about the term Indo-Pacific. The outlook was driven by a greater emphasis on the importance of India as an emerging center of power in the regional order—whose economic potential and strategic weight must be reckoned with and leveraged to ASEAN's benefit (Hoang, 2019).*

ii. Interview Results

Table 6

Thematic Coding Sub-themes under the Theme ASEAN SCS Strategies

ASEAN SCS Strategies
Limits of ASEAN Way of Conflict Management
ASEAN Way of Conflict Management
ASEAN pursues multidirectional diplomacy

Limits of ASEAN Way of Conflict Management.

KI No. 3. *So, ASEAN's importance is enhanced because it is not the most perfect reason organization but at least an effective one it dealt with coverage for example. So, the future is you know we're looking thicker in the SCS, or they continue in these negotiations with China until all the claimants were satisfied. But the final agreement suits their interests so it may never occur. Once again, the journey is more important than the destination because of the COC is like the DOC in the past—anybody can break it on this nothing much you can do about it because there's no effective way of enforcement; certainly, UN can't do it.*

ASEAN Way of Conflict Management.

KI No. 3. *For ASEAN, you know who it has ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which we haven't mentioned that basically says, we're taking a middle ground. We want to be central. Don't try to divide us. Don't try to force us to take sides. So, some cases we're just going to be able to do nothing. It may hurt our own interest but we're not going to be forced to choose sides. We try to manipulate the situation so you both have to compete to get our support with China and the US will do what's necessary to keep both on sides. So, you have Asian summits with China, and you raise the US up to a comprehensive trading partnership with ASEAN along with China and Australia so that's the ASEAN position there.*

ASEAN pursues multidirectional diplomacy

KI No. 1. *Well, in a way. The brand of China's authoritarianism has a bearing especially on ASEAN. There are states that would fully support China especially the Indochina region, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos due to the China money. If not all of the ASEAN countries, they are betting on China because of its economic reliability. But when it comes to security, middle powers in Southeast Asia relies on the US particularly the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam. So, you see the dichotomy, that is referred to as decoupling or de-risking. ASEAN countries are trying to play safe now because either of the superpowers deliver economic and military power. China has the economic prowess; US has the military strength. That is the dichotomy right now.*

b. External Entities' SCS Strategies

i. Thematic Coding Results

Table 7

Thematic Coding Sub-themes

under the Theme External Entities' SCS Strategies

External Entities' SCS Strategies
China asserts dominance over the SCS
Importance of the SCS
Omni enmeshment in the SCS dispute
US seeks own SCS order

China asserts dominance over the SCS refers to any measure the People's Republic of China implements to enforce its entitlement over the contested maritime territory through expansionism and leadership in the region.

China has continued pressing its advantages in the region—conducting high-intensity naval and bomber exercises in late July. It has also changed the classification of some of the disputed areas from offshore navigation to coastal navigation. These actions, as well as the recent creation of administrative districts for the Spratly and Parcel Islands, further the country's control over those areas and strengthen its claim of the islands as territories of China (McLaughlin, 2020).

China seeks own SCS order. *References to the CCD, however, are most pronounced in China's peripheral diplomacy, i.e. vis-à-vis China's near neighborhoods, including Southeast Asia. At the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in 2014, Xi stated that China's goal is to turn China's neighborhood areas into a community of common destiny. The CCD priority given to near neighborhoods is not only a natural function of geography but also in line with China's strategic culture which projects its influence to the outer world through concentric circles. As Tan See Seng remarks, the importance*

which the Chinese attach to outreach to their near abroad is clear in their multilateral commitments and conduct: strong, active and even creative in its near abroad, but decreasing steadily with distance away from China. Southeast Asia and ASEAN thus occupy an important place in the rolling out of the CCD (Hoang, 2019).

China challenges US SCS intervention. *On the other hand, the US has only belatedly and slowly accepted the idea that China is a strategic competitor with the intention of replacing it as a global power in a few decades, bent on introducing illiberal practices targeted against the world's democracies, and focused on dislodging it as the resident power in the Indo-Pacific under a shorter timeframe. In no way is the US' shift in its policy toward China more evident in the statement of the US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. He delivered this last July of 2020, which declared China's claims in the contested waters as completely unlawful and that the US stands with [our] Southeast Asian allies and partners in protecting their sovereign rights to offshore resources, consistent with their rights and obligations under international law (Ong and Bandong, 2022)*

China controls COC formulation. *By the end of 2020, in part due to COVID-19-related delays, ASEAN and China had completed only the first of three planned readings of the negotiating text, a process through which parties are supposed to refine their positions and narrow their differences. Although China is pushing the negotiation as well as the positive narrative that talks are making progress, Vietnam is unwilling to rush the negotiation at the expense of the code's substance and effectiveness. China favors provisions at odds with Vietnam's preferences. For example, China wants to be able to veto joint*

military exercises with external powers and to prohibit firms from outside the region from exploiting SCS resources. While Vietnam wants the code to encompass all disputed features and overlapping maritime areas, including the Paracels, China prefers to limit the geographic scope to the Spratlys. Vietnam would also like to establish a commission to monitor implementation. Vietnam is now just trying to get ASEAN not to sign a bad deal, commented an analyst (ICG, 2021).

China's energy investment in the SCS. *In response to Vietnamese denunciations of China for deploying a giant oil rig, HYSY 981, into waters south of the Paracel Islands, China's Foreign Ministry vehemently defended CNOOC's rights to undertake work around the Paracel Islands and condemned interference by Vietnamese patrol vessels (China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014a, 2014b). Moreover, Chinese state media has widely broadcast details of the May 2014 violence that took place against Chinese nationals in Vietnam (Cotillon, 2017).*

Importance of the SCS pertains to the significance of the maritime territory and the consequences the conflict generates for non-claimants.

The SCS is believed to contain 11 billion barrels of proven and possible oil reserves, and with an estimated 190 TcF (trillion cubic feet) of proven and probable natural gas. The energy promise of the SCS, however, is not enough to warrant China's SCS militancy. Much of the reserves are believed to be located along undisputed areas, i.e. those along the coasts (Naval, 2020).

Impact to regional order. *Dyadic disputes are not only linked to one another among disputants. The consequences of the SCS disputes also extend to a larger geographic area. A noteworthy example is Japan's reactions to escalated*

disputes. Although Japan is neither a disputant nor directly adjacent to the SCS (i.e., the Japanese EEZ is not connected to the SCS), increased tensions have influenced the change in Japan's policy toward China and the East Asian region. Japan had controlled the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands until it lost all overseas territories in accordance with the San Francisco Treaty of 1951. Even after the loss, Japan has interests in the SCS for several reasons (Sakuwa, 2017).

Omni enmeshment in the SCS dispute is understood as the entanglement of non-claimant actors to the territorial contestation as well as its effect on the global order.

Between May and July 2014, China unilaterally deployed a giant drilling rig in waters claimed by Vietnam as its EEZ. The move led to a fierce confrontation between Chinese and Vietnamese government vessels and shrank relations between the two countries to the lowest point since 1988. The standoff also served as a litmus test to identify who will side with whom in this conflict. While most of the world remained neutral, several states came out to support Vietnam in one form or another. Among these supporters, the US and Japan stood out as the most powerful and staunchest. The fault line between Vietnam, the US, and Japan on one side and China on the other can be seen as one between status quo and revisionist powers. The former share the same objective of maintaining the balance of power that has kept the region in peace for the last two decades. China, with a long period of rapid economic growth in the last three decades, appears to be determined to use its newfound power to assert its sovereignty claims, which in end effect would amount to its dominance of

the region. The prospects of regional security hinges heavily on how these actors relate to the SCS issue (Vuving, 2014).

Impact of US-China competition. *However, since around 2009, with China's rising assertiveness and the US "pivot" or rebalance to Asia, the region's institutions have threatened to become arenas for Great Power sparring, as happened at the ARF in 2010 over the issue of the SCS as a "core interest" for the Chinese, and again in 2014 over island reclamations and militarization in the contested Spratly Islands, and at the ADDM Plus in 2015 over an aborted joint statement which, if issued, would have included mention of the SCS (Tan, 2017).*

Implicating other external powers. *Concerns about China's assertiveness, particularly in the maritime domain, also stimulated Japan's cooperation with other Asia-Pacific states, namely India. A traditional rival of China, India shares with Japan security concerns about China. In recent years, China's naval buildup and activities in the Indian Ocean and surrounding sea areas has posed concerns for India. Particularly after Prime Minister Modi took office in 2014, the Indo-Japanese security cooperation has been rapidly expanding and deepened. The joint statement issued during Abe's visit to India in 2014 emphasized the 'commitment of Japan and India to the freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce and peaceful settlement of disputes based on the principles of international law' in the context of increasing tensions over the SCS (Panda, 2014). Starting in 2013, India and Japan continue to hold bilateral and trilateral (India, Japan, the US) military drills focusing on maritime operations. India also has expressed an interest in purchasing Japan's Soryu-*

class submarines (Choudhury, 2013; Gady, 2015; Miglani, 2015 (Sakuwa, 2017).

US seeks own SCS order denotes the American-initiated strategies to implement the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and secure influence in the region.

US challenges China's expansionism. *If the objectives of the minilateral have already been outlined and the prospective members are identified, is the Philippines ready to initiate the proposal and invite other countries for discussions? If the major powers, i.e., the US and China, find the minilateral arrangement problematic, what would be their likely response toward it? The answer may depend on the position taken by major countries to the proposal, specifically whether they would support it or not. Batongbacal believes that the opinions and reactions of the major powers are key considerations for any planners involved in setting up a minilateral arrangement. For example, the support of the US through its statements and pronouncements could spell the difference between the success or failure of such initiative, although it is expected that the Americans will support it because they have already expressed interest in the idea. In the case of China, it will likely disapprove of the objectives of such initiative because of its aversion to efforts involving greater unity in the region. Considering China's response to the formation of the Quad, China would likely perceive it as an effort aimed at containing and suppressing them. Likewise, if the Quad as a group, or its member states individually, expresses support for the minilateral arrangement, it will trigger a similar response from China (Ong and Bandong, 2022).*

American and allies' support to co-claimants. *Tighter collaboration with Japan has two benefits for Vietnam. It is a way for Vietnam to gradually increase*

its level of comfort in drawing closer to the US and its network of allies in the region. It also provides an alternative to becoming solely dependent on the US. In other words, closer relations with Japan helps Vietnam to balance China, to reinforce its military capabilities, and strengthen its economy without going through the ideological and historical trauma of rapidly strengthening ties with the US. If the momentum continues, the relationship has the potential to become a trilateral US–Japan– Vietnam relationship (Huong, 2017).

ii. Interview Results

Table 8

Thematic Coding Sub-themes under the Theme ASEAN SCS Strategies

External Entities' SCS Strategies
China asserts dominance over the SCS
Omni enmeshment in the SCS dispute

China asserts dominance over the SCS

KI No. 1. *China has the upper hand. If it backs out of cooperating, then the other countries can't do anything. We have to voice out our concerns but ultimately, but China will have the last say. China is very exclusive. It only wants the co-claimants and those resident powers in the SCS. And they don't want the external powers. Even if the US is voicing out freedom of navigation.*

KI No. 3. *That before Cambodia screw[ed] up things because it wants aid money from China, but Vietnam can do it, to put the shoe in the other foot because Marcos is just trying to improve relations with Vietnam and work on a strategic partnership. And that kind of mirror that countries with common interest with the littoral states should take more control over these issues than ASEAN and try to get back to what I have been alluding to years ago to inform*

ASEAN's positions. But it is clear that that COC is not ever be signed solely as it violates the Philippine interest or Vietnam's or both that these countries are going to agree. So, it has to be done to preempt China from winning ASEAN and isolate them.

Omni enmeshment in the SCS dispute

KI No. 1. *That is very strategic. We actually want to do that. Remember during the time of PGMA, there was a tripartite agreement on the Joint Seismic Agreement among China, Vietnam, and the Philippines which did not push through due to a scientific reason. I think the safest way to do it is to co-manage. If you co-manage with other countries, you recognize that it is co-shared because it is a contested territory. At the same time, it is a win-win solution because not only one country uses the resources, but everyone also benefits.*

Analysis of Data

As part of meeting the trustworthiness criteria of qualitative data analysis, this study subjected the foregoing extracts resulting from thematic coding to content analysis, which aimed to make sense of the data in addressing the research questions through the support of the reviewed literature.

1. Vietnamese SCS Strategies

In response to research question one, the data revealed that Vietnam's SCS strategies can be categorized into four: (1) toward the US, (2) toward China, (3) toward ASEAN, and (4) multidirectional.

a. Toward the US

The Vietnamese-American interactions relative to the SCS dispute were presented by two authors (Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2021) and mentioned in the response of KI No. 3. Nguyen (2019), in particular, stated that Vietnam needs the US to secure the multipolar entanglement of its allies to balance against China:

‘Besides the economic factors, the two countries’ shared interests in the security realm make the US a strong partner of Vietnam. Deepening cooperation with the US is an effective way to enhance Vietnam’s capacity in coping with a wide range of security challenges. In addition, successful Vietnam-US collaboration helped to bolster Vietnam’s partnership with the middle powers, particularly with the EU, India, Japan, Australia, Republic of Korea, and New Zealand. As a result, Vietnam can garner support of the like-minded partners in addressing numerous conventional and non- conventional security issues. Since the beginning of Vietnam’s Renovation policy, one of the highest priorities of Vietnam is to preserve a peaceful and stable strategic environment for development. Therefore, Vietnam attached great importance to the support of partners in promoting peaceful solution of disputes in the SCS, freedom and safety of navigation and overflight, the adherence to international law and existing legal instruments, in particular the UNCLOS 1982. The US and the middle powers are critical partners of Vietnam in strengthening the capacity of the coast guard, law enforcement and maritime domain awareness’ (Nguyen, 2019).

Supporting such postulation were Nguyen and Nguyen:

'[M]any Vietnamese scholars have supported the idea that the establishment of a strategic partnership with the US has to be considered carefully, and it is not urgent at this moment. They mostly think that the current policies of Vietnam toward the US and China are rational and wise. On the one hand, the US is very important to many Southeast Asian countries, which are having the territorial disputes with China over the East Sea. The US drastic deployment of the Indo-Pacific Strategy has helped restrain the Chinese aggressiveness and changed their policies in the region. Although the more drastic actions of the US may create risks for Vietnam's security environment, their positive impacts are much greater. Vietnam's attitude in supporting the US principles in the Indo-Pacific Strategy is completely appropriate in the current context' (2021).

Interview with KI No. 3 also noted Vietnam's apprehension with a deepening relationship with the Americans while acquiescing to FONOPs in the SCS:

They worry that there's polarization in the [Vietnam] and therefore the trust is he wrote it because the guy can't deliver. You know have Americans that on the right that want us not fund Ukraine and so if you're not why would why we put ourselves put our eggs in the American basket only to have him drop it. Drop it on the ground when it suited them? If they could improve relations with China so they're always constraints that way but go up back, you know Vietnamese require foreigners to ask

permission to enter into EEZs, so the US conducted freedom of navigation operations now Vietnam [says] we don't object as long as it contributes to regional security. Stay, come on American Navy. Best stay in the region. Keep sailing here, please but we can't (2023).

Confirming the abovementioned data are the studies of Ha and Le and Vuving, both of which identify three key events in Vietnam's modern history—the introduction of *Doi Moi* (renovation) in 1986, the end of the Cold War in 1991, and China's emboldening revanchism on the territorial waters—that triggered Vietnam to reach out to its traditional democratic and capitalist adversary, the US, to forge initially economic and later on security-related diplomatic ties (2021; 2022). Vuving elaborated that the ascent of Vietnamese modernizers in the CPV would tilt the country to the American orbit. Pietrasiak and Pieczara (2019) suggested that the growing convergence of Washington's rebalancing strategy to Asia and Vietnam's goal to contain China's SCS overtures has strengthened their ties in the security realm. Moreover, Vietnam's attachment to the US was perceived as an opportunity to realize its potential to internationalize its approach to the SCS dispute while building trade health by broadening the supply chain from China to the West (Thuong and Oanh, 2021).

Chubb, however, warned that Vietnam's inclination toward the US might worsen the division inside the ASEAN, as such would be met by China's satellite states with disapproval (2020). This situation can be interpreted as a threat to Vietnamese aspirations for Indo-Pacific regional leadership that Thuong and Oanh ascertained in their SWOT analysis (2021).

b. Toward China

These points were covered by five authors (Phuong, 2019; Le, 2013; Vuving, 2014; Shoji, 2015; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2019) and the opinion of one respondent (KI No. 3).

Such a perspective on hedging strategy is corroborated by Phuong:

‘Yet the two categories of ‘cooperation’ and ‘struggle’ are not mutually exclusive. Vietnam envisions its foreign policy toward China as one of both struggle and cooperation: struggling against China’s expansionist maritime goals while cooperating with China on economic development and other mutual interests’ (2019).

Le also wrote that Vietnam’s reinforcing capability of its maritime defense is a preparation to protect SCS assets from China’s intrusion:

‘Vietnam began to modernize its armed forces soon after Doi Moi was initiated, and these efforts were accelerated in the mid-1990s due to China’s increasing assertiveness in the SCS. In May 1995 CPV General Secretary Do Muoi called for the modernization of the country’s navy and stated that we must reinforce our defense capacity to defend our sovereignty, national interests, and natural marine resources, while at the same time building a maritime economy’ (2013).

Vuving related China’s military encroachment in Vietnamese territory for its energy exploration:

‘Between May and July 2014, China unilaterally deployed a giant drilling rig in waters claimed by Vietnam as its EEZ. The move led to a fierce

confrontation between Chinese and Vietnamese government vessels and shrank relations between the two countries to the lowest point since 1988' (2014).

Shoji further tackled how Vietnam opposed China's infringement of its EEZ through military deterrence and amplifying negative domestic sentiment over the oil rig incident:

'Vietnam demonstrated particularly strong opposition to the confrontation over the oil rig, distinctly different from its responses to the series of troubles occurring at sea or diplomatic exchanges of criticisms in the wake of the recently reignited SCS issue. Vietnam's strong resistance was manifested in its dispatch of many patrol ships, surveillance ships and fishing boats to the scene as a show of strong resistance to China's drilling, and extensive advocacy through the release of photographs and video clips showing the situation of the collisions with China's vessels. Moreover, the country permitted anti-China demonstrations inside and outside the country, and seemingly encouraged demonstrations outside the country. Also notable is the unusually severe tone of the remarks by the CPV, which has its own connections with the Communist Party of China and has functioned as a stabilizing mechanism between the two countries. The report of the 9th Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CPV issued on May 14 declared that the country opposed China's drilling, that it would work toward the suspension of the drilling and that the whole party, all people and the whole Vietnam People's Army would make collective

efforts in order to defend the country's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity while relying on peaceful means (2015).

China is as indispensable to Vietnam as the US is, thus Nguyen and Nguyen stated:

'[Vietnamese scholars] mostly think that the current policies of Vietnam toward the US and China are rational and wise [as] China is the US strong competitor and will sooner or later become a big power in the region' (2021).

KI No. 3, in a conversation, argued the unlikely consequences of Vietnam meeting China militarily over the SCS as it is impacted by the Ukraine War:

But then just talking about the war with China is like opening a can of worms. We have the war in Ukraine, the Russian and American competition, which makes the simple China-Vietnam relations much more complicated (2023).

Such findings are corroborated by existing literatures. Thayer, for instance, elucidated that Vietnam has historically been dealing with its asymmetrical relationship with its neighbor in the north and such has been a force to reckon with in molding its foreign policy. He essayed that Vietnam remains subordinate to China's rise as a global military and economic power, to which it copes with through the dual strategy of struggling and cooperating, especially in the arena that is the SCS (2011; 2016). In addition, this is one of

the factors that pushed Vietnam to pursue multidirectional diplomacy—availing the AMS as many options to handle Chinese pressure (Ha and Le, 2021; Vuving, 2022).

Even about SCS energy exploration ambitions, Vietnam calculates the possibility of entering partnerships with extra-regional entities so as to manage China's subsequent reaction, be it bending toward renewing joint undertakings or meeting a militarized friction over the conflicted seas (Tüter 2022; Truong-Minh and Huyn, 2014).

Undoubtedly, Vietnam's maritime middle power-ship prospects in the Indo-Pacific are measured against its performance in engaging China in addressing the territorial dispute, as evinced by Karim and Nabila (2022), Chubb (2020), and Thuong and Oanh (2021).

c. Toward ASEAN

Two respondents (KI No. 2 and KI No. 3) touched upon this aspect of Vietnamese SCS strategy. KI No. 2, in particular, established the argument that ASEAN is Vietnam's main venue in managing the SCS dispute:

'On SCS, we need come of multilateral organization, not only bilateral setups. We need to have the association with 10 nations to air their issues on the SCS and to solve the problem with multilateral mechanisms through international law specifically UNCLOS 1982.

He added that Vietnam and other SCS co-claimants can negotiate with China through the association:

Not only Vietnam but other countries in the Southeast Asia including the Philippines, Malaysia and some other countries that have interest in the SCS and those with conflict with China.

KI No. 3 expressed Vietnam's aspiration to gain more allies to aid it in addressing the SCS dispute:

So, the diversification is not just to countries, but they joined ASEAN, the ADMM, the ARF, the EAS to discuss the issues of SCS. They do that because they prefer to have more friends than enemies is another expression Vietnam has.

In addition, the respondent explained that Vietnam cushions China's SCS overtures by engaging the Asian giant through ASEAN:

So, the ASEAN is an insulation. You got to grab off a hot wire in the hand you might get hurt. But if you grab a glove, you cannot stop the electricity, but it prevents the worst damage to you. It is like you hanker down as strategy with ASEAN. You are trying to prevent them from siding with China to maintain balance.

Further, the respondent emphasized Vietnam's maximizing leadership opportunities to forward its SCS interests:

When it is Vietnam's time to lead the ADMM Plus, the chief of naval said that Vietnam has made many proposals to call for cooperation, to break ground, and not to make more fighting. It moved ASEAN to greater calls for cooperation. Particularly, if you are the chair and Vietnam's case in

particular held another office, the UN Security Council, you have a lot more influence internationally. The chairmanship is only for a year, but you can set the agenda for the future in a momentum. When the next year comes in, it is expected that they are to address the issues left by the previous chair. So, Vietnam can use it as a mechanism as well.

In line with the foregoing data, literatures in review have substantiated the intention of Vietnam in using ASEAN as an essential venue to achieve legitimacy as an actor in international relations, shedding its isolationist image to donning the integrationist image, and at the same time, as a channel to access multilateralization of the SCS dispute (Pham, 2019; Ha and Le, 2021; Vuving, 2022), which is evident in forging ahead toward its vision for order through the COC since 1999 (Hiep, 2019). Agreeing with these thoughts is Chapman, who exemplified Vietnam's membership as another conduit to convey opposition to China's SCS expansionism (2017). In the same vein, Oishi added that ASEAN offers a mediation regime for its AMS to settle the divergent views on ownership of the maritime territory together with China (2016).

Subjecting Vietnam's foreign policy to a three-lens analysis, Le found out that Vietnam capitalizes on its economic development to secure intramural and extramural ties as well as utilizes chairmanship seats to put in the forefront its SCS interests (2021), of which Chubb and Emmers and Huong's conclusion thus corroborated (2020; 2020).

Relative to SCS energy exploration, Truong-Minh and Huynh (2014) suggested that Vietnam gained the ability to keep China's penchant for

militarized actions in check by invoking the ASEAN-brainchild TAC and DOC, to which both countries are signatories.

Challenging the data's assumption that ASEAN is a viable framework for Vietnam to bring resolution to the SCS dispute is Limaye, who argued that only a minority of the membership is affected by the issue and that the perceived organizational failure is truly rooted in the lack of a coherent approach from the AMS co-claimants (2018). For this, Chheang propounded that the ASEAN Minus X formula or considering entering into minilaterals could be an option for the co-claimants, including Vietnam (2020). Agastia, on the other hand, stressed the inability of ASEAN maritime cooperation fora such as the ARF and ADMM Plus to arrive at pragmatic negotiations as they only serve as talk shops (2021), *which could be unfavorable to Vietnam's reliance on ASEAN for multilateral diplomacy (italics mine)*.

d. Toward establishing a multidirectional diplomacy

These developments were substantiated by six studies (Phoung, 2019; Tuan, Bing and Huong, 2020; Le, 2013; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen, 2019; ICG, 2021; Huong, 2017) and two respondents (KI No. 2 and 3).

Phoung explained how Vietnam manages its relations with China through a two-pronged strategy:

In the post-Cold War era, a third paradigm emerged in Vietnam's strategic approach to foreign policy. Rather than developing close relationships with uniquely Marxist–Leninist countries—as was Vietnam's policy during the Cold War—Vietnam pursued a more flexible strategy of 'cooperation and struggle', a concept that began to appear in

CPV foreign policy documents by 1994 (Hiep, 2013). In 2003, the CPV issued a resolution entitled 'On defence of the homeland in the new situation', which provided greater detail on the twin concepts of 'objects of cooperation' and 'objects of struggle' (Thayer, 2016). In this paradigm, Vietnam's policy is to cooperate with all countries in areas of convergent interests, while struggling against any country that attempts to undermine Vietnam's national interests (Thayer, 2016). Yet the two categories of 'cooperation' and 'struggle' are not mutually exclusive. Vietnam envisions its foreign policy toward China as one of both struggle and cooperation: struggling against China's expansionist maritime goals while cooperating with China on economic development and other mutual interests (2019).

A multidirectional Vietnamese diplomacy enhances sovereignty, as Tuan, Binh, and Huong underscored:

At strategic levels, experts tend to agree that Vietnam's diplomacy has since Doi Moi been more pragmatic and role of ideology has declined (Chapman, 2017; Dosch and Tuan, 2004; Hiep, 2018; Quy, 2019; Thayer, 2016; Trung, 2017; Tung and Tu, 2018). Hiep (2018) notes that Vietnam's foreign policy stresses the principles of independence, peace, cooperation, and development based on international law, equity, mutual benefit. In practice, Vietnam pursues firm position against China in the SCS and rapprochement with the US. In a similar vein, Chapman (2017) argues that the core interests of Vietnam namely maintaining peace and stability, protecting sovereignty and independence, and promoting

position in the international arena remain unchanged since Doi Moi. Vietnam's main objective in foreign relations is to reduce uncertainty in the external environment while benefiting from deepening its process of integration into the world. In order to achieve this objective, Vietnam pursues a multidirectional foreign policy to enhance its leverage against potential threats. This allows Vietnam to avoid falling into either camp of balancing or bandwagoning with great powers (2020).

Le argued that the prevailing geopolitical environment has shaped Vietnam's multidirectional foreign policy:

As hedging requires substantial linkages with foreign partners and international institutions, Vietnam's pursuit of this strategy would have been impossible if the country had not successfully diversified and multilateralized its foreign relations in the early 1990s. Therefore, changes in Vietnam's foreign policy played a crucial part in the formulation and operationalization of its hedging strategy. At the same time, shifts in regional geopolitics over the last few decades have also facilitated Vietnam's hedging strategy. Specifically, post-Cold War trends, such as China's rise and regional wariness about its growing power, the emergence of ASEAN as the key broker of multilateral security arrangements, the renewed interest and involvement of external powers in the region, and the likely future intensification of strategic rivalry between the US and China, have all been favourable to Vietnam's efforts to deepen its linkages with other countries and strengthen the external foundations of its hedging strategy vis-a-vis China. Without

these external conditions, the strategy would not have been a viable option for Vietnam (2013).

Nguyen and Nguyen appreciated multidirectional diplomacy as Vietnam's coping mechanism with the US-China bipolarism:

Vietnam's attitude in supporting the US principles in the Indo-Pacific Strategy is completely appropriate in the current context. On the other hand, China is the US strong competitor and will sooner or later become a big power in the region. Given this view, Vietnam needs the US supports in the short run, but also has to consider the rise of China in the long run in order to have appropriate policies. Thus, the establishment of a strategic partnership with the US has to be considered seriously and cautiously by the Vietnamese leadership. (2021).

Nguyen noted Vietnam's increased participation in regional and international multilateral venues:

Vietnam will work closely with ASEAN countries and the middle powers to promote an effective and inclusive multilateralism at regional and global levels. In the upcoming decade, the ASEAN-led institutions, APEC and ASEM will be the main regional mechanisms for Vietnam to advance its interests. At the same time, Vietnam will strive for effective collaboration in dealing with the pressing global issues through a number of FTAs, the global economic institutions such as ADB, WB, IMF, and the UN system. By doing so, Vietnam seeks mutually beneficial

cooperation which can reduce the risks caused by the major powers' contestation (Nguyen, 2019).

ICG reported Japan regarding Vietnam's support as a hinge of success for the US-led Quad:

More importantly, Suga stated that Vietnam was crucial to achieving our vision of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and our valuable partner, suggesting that Japan and the U.S. share a perception of Vietnam's role in carrying out their Indo-Pacific strategies. Both countries could thus seek to enlist Vietnam in a Quad plus arrangement adding it to their relationship with Australia and India. (2021).

However, Huong saw Vietnam's rapprochement toward Japan as a way to maintain non-committal ties with the US:

Tighter collaboration with Japan has two benefits for Vietnam. It is a way for Vietnam to gradually increase its level of comfort in drawing closer to the US and its network of allies in the region. It also provides an alternative to becoming solely dependent on the US (2017).

KI No. 2 expressed the importance of Vietnam maintaining relationship with both the US and China:

China has a lot of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. These are kind of Chinese initiatives to promote cooperation with other countries in Southeast Asia especially mutual cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. China has lot of

interest and has most battle in the sea with Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia, and has border with Vietnam and Laos. China is our partner for development and the US as an actor for peace and stability in East Asia.

He further added that 'both countries can. But China is directly involved in the SCS. And US is an actor. Somehow the two countries, both countries continue to have influence in the region. For Vietnam, its position is strategically important, that is why China, and the US wants to be involved. I expect that China and the US as actors to contribute to peace and stability in the SCS. I cannot speak about what China can contribute to other countries because it is now the second most powerful country with the US as the most powerful, which makes them responsible in maintaining peace and stability.

Such line of thought is also supported by KI No. 3, exemplifying Vietnam's reaction toward the 2014 oil rig incident and the US FONOPs:

When the 2014 incident occurred, Vietnam did not allow any of its military ship to go near the area, to be around. There was such an asymmetry of power. It is like Oh, we are not going to war with China. You have to grit and bear it as much as possible. In [Philippines'] case, they physically occupy the waters and take the fish. And Vietnam is smart enough, saying, Yes, we do not like them here. But they will go home anyways. We are going to manage these relations. We do not go kicking them in the shins because they will punch us in the face. It is a

difficult situation that they keep manipulating for years coming back and forth. They go to the US, saying that they got China first and improve our relations. And got a phone call from Biden, so that got China saying, Oh, what is Vietnam doing?

The aforementioned data gained academic footing from the reviewed literatures in this research study. The Vietnamese Defense White Paper established Vietnam's seeking various streams of engagement with other state actors to further diversify sources of leverage for its SCS dispute claims while maintaining its adherence to its Three No's and hedging strategy (Pham, 2019).

Additionally, Vietnamese SCS strategies have been observed to correspond to multiple SCS actors, aside from the three specified traditional SCS actors (the US, China, and ASEAN), and further to non-co-claimant external entities, to safeguard the country's territorial integrity (De Gurung, 2018; Le, 2021). Currently, the AMS has developed strategic partnerships with 16 different countries, including the world powers the US, China, the EU, Russia, and Japan (Chapman, 2017). According to Ha and Le and Vuving, this diplomatic trajectory taken by Vietnam roots from the introduction of *doi moi* in the late 1980s and was carried over as a norm to multilateralize security relations by hastening integration (2021; 2022). This Vietnamese SCS tactic is coherent with Ba's observation that networks of bilateral and multilaterals would shape regional order in Asia-Pacific (2013).

Another take on understanding Vietnam's approach to its SCS foreign policy is offered by Pietrasiak and Pieczara (2019), Thayer (2011; 2016), Le (2021), and De Gurung (2019), who saw multidirectionalism as a

counterstrategy to its asymmetrical relationship with and modern imperialism by China.

For Chubb, and Emmers and Huong, this blueprint of Vietnamese SCS diplomacy contributes to the country's demonstration of its leadership capabilities in economic and maritime security sectors (2020; 2020).

2. Comparison of the Vietnamese and Philippine SCS Strategies

How do the Vietnamese SCS strategies compare with the Philippines? The third research question motivates this research to present similarities and differences between the aforementioned objects of the study, resulting in four areas of comparison: 1) engaging the US, 2) engaging China, 3) engaging ASEAN, and 4) independent foreign policy. A fifth area, Philippine-Vietnamese Cooperation, was revealed by the data, and a corresponding analysis is hereafter presented.

a. Engaging the US

This section discusses the SCS strategies employed by the Philippines toward the US as well as the similarities and differences with their Vietnamese counterpart.

i. Philippines engages the US

Two studies (Ong and Bandong, 2022; Southgate and Kho, 2016) and the response of KI No. 1 have established the fact regarding the Philippines engagement with the US. Southgate and Kho, for instance, wrote that the Philippines during the [Benigno] Aquino presidency welcomed US intervention in the SCS to achieve regional geopolitical equilibrium (2016). Moreover, Ong and Bandong explored the idea of a Philippine-led SCS minilateral, which

necessitates US support to materialize, let alone succeed or fail (2022). They noted also that the level of the Philippines' ties to the US measures success in repelling China's dominance in the SCS (2022). Furthermore, KI No. 1 suggested that the Philippines' multilateral maritime defense venture is anchored on the US and its allies.

These findings are also in line with the arguments raised by Amer and Li and Kreuzer, stating that the Philippines relies on its American ally for support in the SCS dispute against hostilities that it might elicit from China (2012, 2026).

ii. Comparison with Vietnamese SCS Strategies toward the US

The data generated by this study lends credibility to the convergence between the Philippine and Vietnamese SCS strategies in engaging American involvement. Both countries are in agreement that the US plays a crucial role in counterbalancing China's adventurism in the conflicted seas (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2021). Just like the Philippines, Vietnam's access to multipolar support from Indo-Pacific middle powers for its claim in the territorial contestation is mainly vested in its affinity to the US since they are its allies (Nguyen, 2019). KI No. 3, however, emphasized that Vietnam remains non-committal to tilt toward the US as it calculates the risks such alignment can provoke China to deliver not only to its domestic jurisdiction but to the whole regional order (2023).

b. Engaging China

This section discusses the SCS strategies employed by the Philippines toward China as well as the similarities and differences with their Vietnamese counterpart.

i. Philippines engages China

Three studies (Han, 2023; De Castro, 2020; Naval, 2020) and two respondents (KI No. 1 and KI No. 2) established this factor. KI No. 1 acknowledged that the Philippines is required to engage China in managing its SCS claims. He continued that regardless of the outcome of the Sino-American competition, the AMS must include in its diplomatic arsenal responding to China's actions and reactions. Noting the current administration's warming up to the US and its entitlement to the 1951 Mutual Defense Agreement, the respondent maintained that socializing China is imperative to the Philippine SCS strategy.

Han observed that China linking its BRI to the Philippine infrastructural and other economic recovery programs can lessen antagonism between the two countries (2023). Also, he supported the view that the omni-enmeshment of reasons and powers in the SCS dispute has emboldened Manila to hone its double-barrel tactic toward China (2023). De Castro, on the other hand, noted that the Philippine hedging was felt even in the ASEAN as the country lobbied for an stringent COC from a rhetorical DOC (2020). Naval further pinned this down when he said that the Philippines has demonstrated counterbalancing China by challenging it in an international tribunal, and in effect, tarnishing its revanchist claims (2020).

On the other hand, KI No. 1 reflected on the incoherent Philippine stance versus China, accounting for foreign policy swings in line with administration changes—from a China-friendly Arroyo to a confrontational Aquino then back to a China-disposed Duterte. This reading of events is shared similarly by KI No. 3, who vividly noted the juxtaposition of the China-appeasing Duterte and the incumbent President Marcos' confrontational approach.

The aforementioned data are supported by reviewed literatures. In Kreuzer's 2016 paper, it is evident that the Philippines' fluctuating stance on engaging China in SCS conflict management. A sharp contrast could be gleaned from the abrupt transition from China-friendly Arroyo, bent on seeing through the trilateral JSMU until her defection due to domestic political pressures, to Aquino's dragging the Asian giant to internationalization of the issue, particularly the tribunal petition. In return, the Philippines received a higher level of aggression from China (Kreuzer, 2016).

Consequently, Amer and Li (2012) determined that the Philippines lacks an established hotline or equivalent mechanisms to communicate with China regarding encounters in the disputed territories, thus worsening the tensions between the two parties.

It is important to note that the imperative for the Philippines to continue socializing China amidst its recent pivot to the US holds water based on Ravindran's hypothesis that China can exert economic coercion against the Philippines, considering the tightening grip the former wields as a trade superpower over the latter's dependence on Chinese demand and supply. (2012).

ii. Comparison with Vietnamese SCS Strategies toward China

The results of the data gathering highlighted a more structured Vietnamese approach to China than the Philippines'. According to Phuong, Vietnam's hedging strategy has been carrying out a similar struggling-cooperating method to straddle between China's auspices and hostilities (2019). Part of this two-pronged outlook is Vietnam's naval military enhancement, owing to the lessons of the 2014 oil rig confrontation with China (Le, 2013; Vuving, 2014; Shoji, 2015).

Regardless, Nguyen and Nguyen argued that Vietnam regards a global power, China, as a major partner (2021). Additionally, KI No. 3 warned that Vietnam's ensuing a military encounter with China would have negative consequences (2023). In this regard, Vietnam has instituted various levels of bilateral mechanisms or treaties with China to resolve any exchanges of aggression (Thayer, 2011; 2016).

c. Engaging ASEAN

This section discusses the SCS strategies employed by the Philippines toward ASEAN as well as the similarities and differences with their Vietnamese counterparts.

i. Philippines engages ASEAN

Ong and Bandong appreciated the Philippines' broaching the SCS dispute with ASEAN while acknowledging the organization's neutrality during the Aquino presidency (2022).

Further, he related how the Philippines utilized the association as a platform to deter China from its military advances in the disputed territories by focusing on the crafting of the SCS COC (2020).

The abovementioned findings are corroborated by Amer and Li and Kreuzer's study (2012; 2016). Both papers indicated that the Philippines harnessed its parent regional organization to internationalize the SCS dispute, specifically against Chinese overtures, and to promote the finalization of the COC among its peers (Amer and Li, 2012; Kreuzer, 2016).

ii. Comparison with Vietnamese SCS Strategies toward ASEAN

Relative to the Philippine SCS strategies toward ASEAN, this study's data indicated that Vietnam is more forthcoming in underlining the regional organization as a preferred venue not only for multilateral management of the maritime conflict by upholding international law, particularly the UNCLOS but also for reaching out to China for negotiation (KI No. 2; 2023). KI No. 3 likened Vietnamese accession to the association as a cushion to protect the country from China's hegemony. In addition, another advantage that Vietnam was able to reap from its membership in ASEAN that the Philippines has to optimize more is harnessing leadership positions to benefit its SCS campaign (2023).

d. Independent SCS diplomacy

This section discusses the Philippine SCS strategies upholding sovereign interests as well as their similarities and dissimilarities with their Vietnamese counterpart.

i. The Philippine independent SCS strategy

A study (Ba, 2016) and three respondents (KI No. 1; KI No. 2; KI No. 3) established this factor. Ba recognized the Philippine tribunal petition's role as a catalyst for other SCS co-claimants to seek international law remedies in approaching territorial disputes (2016).

KI No. 1 suggested that the Philippines acquisition of the submarine signals its campaign to boost naval defense capability, aimed at increasing deterrent capability against China's expansionism. He further considered the Philippines' leverage as a middle power or a "bridge" to the opposing great powers relative to the SCS dispute. KI No. 2, on the other hand, has pointed out that the current Philippine administration is rekindling Aquino's responsive SCS strategy, which was deferred during the time of Duterte. Despite the shift in the strategy, KI No. 3 believed that the Philippines has implemented unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral SCS strategies when necessary.

According to Amer and Li (2012), the Philippines treaded toward internationalization for its part in attempting to resolve the entanglement in the SCS dispute by reaching out to its traditional partner, the US, the ASEAN, and bringing Chinese claims to the international court, a postulation also mentioned by Kreuzer in his paper (2016).

ii. Comparison with the Vietnamese multidirectional policy

Data from this study proved that Vietnam invested more in diversifying diplomatic ties on the economic and defense fronts with a galaxy of actors within or outside ASEAN than its peer co-claimant. Whereas, the Philippines is refocusing on its SCS claims and regaining composure with the US, Vietnam

has entrenched a systematized omni-directional foreign policy toward its SCS claims, coinciding with the introduction of *doi moi* (2019). For Tuan, Binh, and Huong, Vietnam's broad-based tactic was devised to safeguard independence from any foreign sway, chiefly China's tightening grip over the contested territorial waters with the help of other regional powers (2020).

Le articulated further the aforementioned observations by citing that the post-Cold War Vietnamese trajectory toward multilateralized foreign relations was shaped by a geopolitical climate defined by ASEAN's introduction of the ARF and the exacerbation of Sino-American bipolarism (2013), which was corroborated by Nguyen and Nguyen in their 2021 study. Moreover, it was ascertained that Vietnam's quest for involvement in multilateral venues such as the ASEAN, APEC, ASEM, the global financing institutions, and the UN is geared toward widening its range of safety nets against hegemonic pressures (Nguyen, 2019). Huong and the ICG agreed that part of Vietnam's tough balancing act between Washington and China is soliciting Tokyo's help (2017; 2021).

From a Vietnamese scholar's perspective, KI No. 2 stated that while Vietnam is determined to concretize its ties with the US, such would never imply the former's abandonment of its relations with China, elaborating that both global leaders are integral to keeping peace and stability in the region (2023).

e. Philippine-Vietnamese Cooperation

This section discusses the possibility of collaboration between the Philippines and Vietnam in managing the SCS and the dispute thereof.

All respondents have mentioned the potential of Philippines-Vietnamese cooperation. KI No. 3 delved into the current Philippine administration's engagement with Vietnam, insinuating that translating the brewing partnership to SCS cooperation could be a potent deterrent to China's influence over ASEAN.

Regarding possible cooperation between the two AMS, KI No. 1 affirmed that such strategic collaboration is probable considering their aborted JMSU with China:

KI No. 3 suggested that even if the Philippines and Vietnam fail to reconcile their territorial entitlements according to international law, they can pursue a pragmatic setup.

KI No. 2 saw the future JMSU and other natures of Philippine-Vietnamese collaboration can be a launching pad for co-claimants to persuade China to cooperate.

Enriching the plausibility of these assumptions are several academic writings reviewed. Vietnam's White Defense Paper expressly dictated that the country welcomes forms of negotiation, consultation, and cooperation in pacific settlements of disputes in accordance with international law (Pham, 2019). This is demonstrated anew by the AMS in its spearheading ASEAN, together with the Philippines, in rendering a binding and comprehensive COC (Hiep, 2019). Also, Manila found an ally in Hanoi for the latter's standing up for the Philippine win in the PCA arbitration, which disproves Beijing's extensive claims in the contested waters (2019).

In addition, Vietnamese plans for extracting SCS mineral reserves mentioned the country's openness for shared development with its peers as a

long-term solution for regional energy security concerns, which would bring about equality and order in the Indo-Pacific (Pham, 2014; Tüter, 2022). Likewise, such was noted by Chubb in his study, exemplifying the country's potential to initiate co-management schemes on fisheries and other SCS resources as an avenue for regional leadership (2020). These observations are coherent with Oishi's mediation regime theory, which Vietnam can utilize via ASEAN as the preferred forum to reach co-claimants such as the Philippines and China (2016).

3. Implications of ASEAN WOCM-Vietnamese and Philippine SCS Strategies and vice versa

Responding to the third research question, the data pointed to the dualistic character of the Vietnam-Philippine-ASEAN nexus of SCS strategies, elucidating the positive and negative impact of the regional organizations on the members states' and vice versa.

a. ASEAN WOCM to Vietnamese SCS Strategies

i. Advantages

Notwithstanding operating on intergovernmentalism and statecentrism, ASEAN exhibited centrality to mobilize consensus-based decision-making into action and achieve a degree of progress in managing the territorial contestation (Limaye, 2018) through the provision of collaborative frameworks (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022; Oishi, 2016a) and maintaining dialogical cooperation via its organic fora (Agastia, 2021; ASEAN Secretariat, 2022), among others, which all have been conducive to Vietnam's coping mechanism with the territorial

contestation. This is evinced by the data, which brought to the fore five (5) positive implications of the ASEAN WOCM for the Vietnamese SCS strategies.

(1) ASEAN provides multilateral platform for Vietnam

A study of Hoang in 2019 and the opinion of two respondents (KI Nos. 2 and 3) have mentioned about the multilateral avenue that ASEAN has provided for Vietnam. This is articulated by KI No. 2 when he noted that Vietnam needs ASEAN as the multilateral venue to manage the SCS dispute through international law, specifically the UNCLOS 1982. This is supported by the opinion of KI No. 3. He expressed Vietnam's aspiration to gain more allies to aid it in addressing the SCS dispute by joining ASEAN and harnessing participation in the ADMM, the ARG, and the EAS.

Further, KI No. 3 has underlined ASEAN articulating neutrality in the SCS dispute by releasing the AOIP, which gears to enjoy support from both the US and China through their involvement in the regional organization-led summits and comprehensive trading agreements.

Hoang also noted ASEAN's developing relations with Japan, which edged out China in terms of doling out infrastructural projects to the region, and India, which poses ASEAN's new source of leverage against China (2019).

The aforementioned findings corroborated Chapman's argument that multilateralism forms a core part of internationalizing Vietnamese foreign relations, specifying it as one of Vietnam's tripartite anchors of multidirectional diplomacy and being realized through its membership in the 10-nation bloc as a way to manage China's SCS adventurism (2017). Similarly, Ha and Le and Vuving chronicled in their respective papers that

Vietnam's accession to ASEAN manifested the country's commitment to multidirectionalization (2021; 2022).

(2) ASEAN enables Vietnam to engage China

A study (CGI, 2021) and a respondent (KI No. 2) shared similar sentiments that the regional body has enabled Vietnam to engage China. ICG made evident ASEAN's capability to bridge Vietnam's multilateral access to China at the COC negotiation table (2021). KI No. 2 echoed a similar argument, stating that such an advantage is afforded not only by Vietnam but by the other AMS co-claimants. Further, KI No. 3 explained that Vietnam uses ASEAN engagement to cushion China's SCS overtures.

Congruent with the aforementioned findings is Thayer's analysis of the asymmetrical Sino-Vietnamese relationship, where he stated that the latter uses multilaterals such as the ASEAN to reach out to the former (2011; 2016). Hiep observed the same in his study on the Vietnamese contributions in the initial phase of formulating the COC in 1999, which the AMS capitalized on to raise opposition to China's salami tactics in the maritime territory (2019). In the same vein, Le wrote that Vietnam had been optimizing its accession to the association to keep China in check by way of enmeshing the Western countries (2021), which was also noted by Pietrasiak and Pieczara (2019). Chubb perceived likewise, despite arguing that such a West-leaning movement by Vietnam had earned the ire of its China-sympathizing ASEAN colleagues (2020).

(3) ASEAN enables Vietnam to navigate US-China rivalry

Three studies (Hoang, 2019; McLaughlin, 2019; Ong and Bandong, 2022) and a respondent (KI No. 1) concurred in the fact ASEAN has enabled

Vietnam to navigate the US-China competition. KI No. 1 considered ASEAN maneuvering the Sino-American competition to enjoy the best of both worlds: China's economic prowess and the US military strength. Moreover, Hoang stressed ASEAN's exercise of independence from China's overtures, such as its non-committal stance with the former's CCD, which is compensated by the regional organization through accommodating customary aspects of the Chinese vision of regional order (2019).

Ong and Bandong noted that ASEAN securing US commitment to upholding international law in the SCS can balance out Chinese adventurism in the SCS (2022). McLaughlin, in addition, saw US-sponsored military enhancement as advantageous for the AMS in protecting their naval sovereignty (2019).

In line with the aforementioned findings is De Gurung's analysis of Vietnam's CDS, which highlighted promoting peace and stability in the SCS due to the country's approval of American and Japanese maritime activities sans Chinese opposition (2018). Under Le's globalist lens, Vietnam's accession to ASEAN affords it the ability to hedge toward China with the help of the US and its allies (2021). Agreeing with this perception were Pietrasiak and Pieczara, who, however, warned of its divisive consequences within the regional organization, and to a certain extent, alienating China along with the BRI benefits (2019). Further, Emmers and Huong identified Vietnam's straddling the US-China gap as a criterion for its exercise of leadership within ASEAN (2020).

(4) ASEAN upholds Vietnam's campaign for peaceful conflict management

Four studies (Ba, 2016; Han, 2023; Ong and Bandong, 2022; Shoji, 2015) have supported the plausibility of this implication.

Ba illustrated the pursuit of the COC as the 10-nation bloc's commitment to a rules-based regime as well as providing a "mutually acceptable solution" among parties (2016).

Han reaffirmed Ba's argument, asserting that the COC negotiation reinforces cooperation between China and ASEAN and better management of the SCS human-ocean regional system (2023)

Ong and Bandong indicated ASEAN's thrust to render an enforceable COC gear toward practicing neutrality amid the US-China competition by emphasizing non-militarization and self-restraint among parties (2022).

Likewise, Shoji highlighted the association's propensity to non-militarization of the conflicted waters as evinced by the Chairman's Statement of the ASEAN Summit in 2014, which urged de-escalation of confrontational moves and contact through confidence-building measures (2015).

In agreement with the aforementioned data, the 2019 Defense White Paper emphasized COC crafting, submission to international law, and non-militarization as hallmarks of Vietnam's approach to the SCS (De Gurung, 2018; Pham, 2019). Hiep's study on the Vietnamese contributions in the initial phase of formulating the COC in 1999 related how the AMS capitalized on raising opposition to China's salami tactics in the maritime territory (2019). Moreover, various ASEAN instrumentalities such as the DOC, its subsequent implementing guidelines, and ASEAN-China relations' 20th

anniversary statement put in print the organization's action toward establishing regulations among SCS parties, including Vietnam (ASEAN Secretariat, 2011; 2021; 2022).

(5) ASEAN sets the stage for Vietnamese SCS leadership

KI No. 3 emphasized Vietnam's maximizing leadership opportunities, such as its stint at ADMM Plus chairmanship and at the UN Security Council, to forward its SCS interests not only during its tenure but by preparing the future agenda.

This particular finding is coherent with Chubb's argument, which identified ASEAN as a forum for Vietnam to exercise its middle power-ship (2020). In agreement was Thuong and Oanh's study, which subjected Vietnam's Indo-Pacific standing to SWOT analysis (2021). Karim and Nabila observed the same phenomenon with Vietnam's tough balancing act between US alignment and geographical tension with China (2022). Specifically mentioning the ADMM Plus, Emmers and Huong itemized Vietnam's actualizing opportunities to harness maritime security leadership, especially when it became the lone SCS activist in ASEAN when the Philippines' Duterte employed softer policies toward China (2020).

ii. Disadvantages

Whereas ASEAN is praised for its longevity and initiating cooperation among politically, economically, and socio-culturally diverse states, it has been criticized for its inefficacy in responding to the concerns besetting the SCS dispute, particularly its maritime security cooperative organs, which are reduced to being mere talk shops rather than leading to practical solutions

(Agastia, 2021). The data pointed out three negative implications faced by the regional organization in facilitating solutions to the problematique, which may pose risks to the Vietnam SCS strategy.

(1) Diverse interests in ASEAN weakens Vietnam's independence from the US-China competition

A respondent (KI No. 1) and two studies (Southgate and Kho, 2016; Tan, 2017) supported the plausibility of this implication.

KI No. 1 perceived uncurbed Sino-American influence over ASEAN unity due to the divergent interests of its membership: some of the AMS aligned with China for economic benefits; the others rely on the US for security prowess.

The 2012 fiasco reminded Southgate and Kho of ASEAN's falling prey to China's exploiting alliance with Cambodia to hinder intramural consensus (2016).

Tan talked about ASEAN centrality being subordinated to the US-China power competition (2017).

He continued that such a stumbling block extends to ASEAN-initiated venues ARF and ADMM Plus, where Washington and China manipulate agenda to serve their own interests (2017).

Chubb postulated that while ASEAN has offered a refuge for Vietnam to hone its regional leadership potential, it has also become a crucible testing Vietnam's success in soliciting the consensus of or alienating its China-influenced colleagues (2020), particularly Cambodia. On a wider scale, the ICG reported that the territorial contestation has been

leaving ASEAN torn between China's CCD and the US's FOIP—putting the fate of the 10-bloc nation of lesser powers in the hands of two warring imperial entities (2018). *Both of these challenges inherent to ASEAN diversity may take a toll on Vietnamese independent diplomacy* (italics mine).

(2) ASEAN's dependence on China exposes Vietnam to the latter's hegemony.

Three studies (Thayer, 2013; De Castro, 2020; and ICG, 2021) have discussed about the ASEAN's dependency to China, which exposed Vietnam to the latter's hegemony. Thayer indicated China's predisposition for bilateral setup with AMS co-claimants infringe ASEAN centrality over the SCS dispute and put in jeopardy relations between the two sides (2013).

De Castro also warned of increasing Chinese pressure on military and economic fronts, as well as the BRI's impact on recipient SEA countries, to sway the direction of COC crafting in China's favor and solidify a Sino-centric order among ASEAN (2020).

ICG specified China's predilections that would stipulate in the COC exclusivity of the SCS joint military exercises and resource exploration to the co-claimants as well as limiting its scope to the Spratlys only. The group reported that Vietnam is bargaining for concessions advantageous to ASEAN (2021).

Relative to China's exploiting polarization among the AMS toward the SCS controversy, it is worth remembering Baviera's caution that relegating multilateral resolutions for bilateral negotiations could prove either to be

constructive or destructive to genuine SCS cooperation (2013). For Thayer, Vietnam should be vigilant in engaging China by employing its struggle-or-cooperate strategy owing to the fact that the former occupies the disadvantaged side of their asymmetrical relationship (2013), *which could be reinforced in an ASEAN that under China's sway* (italics mine). Similarly, Yu's conclusion foreboded China's implementation of its maxi-mini regime in the SCS, where the country would claim more stakes over the SCS but lessen its accountability to the other claimants (2015). Another related concern raised by Pietrasiak and Pieczara was that US-Vietnam cooperation can subvert ASEAN unity because of Chinese-leaning peers (2019).

(3) ASEAN's institutions lack enforceable mechanisms

The studies of De Castro in 2020 and of Ong and Bandong in 2022 as well as the response of KI No. 3 have pinpointed the lack of enforceable mechanisms of the ASEAN affiliated institutions. De Castro, for instance, described the DOC as a mere rhetorical reference to present a semblance of cooperation among the claimants (2020). Ong and Bandong, on the other hand, elucidated Castro's argument, putting in broad strokes the association's weak binding mechanism as it has yet to institute coordinating mechanisms to address the dispute (2022).

KI No. 3 agreed to Ong and Bandong's statement, citing that the negotiations for the COC face uncertainties, especially the lack of institutional arrangements to resolve them.

Corroborating the aforementioned findings are Emmers and Huong, who in their study mentioned Vietnam bridging the gap of unequipped

ASEAN norms in pushing for actions that rendered a degree of progress toward achieving a multilateral resolution to the SCS dispute (2020). Agastia exemplified ASEAN's maritime cooperation fora such as the ARF, ADMM, and ADMM Plus, whose functions border on the dialogical rather than the pragmatic (2021). For Baviera, ASEAN's power of multilateralism could be shown in its pursuit of the COC (2013).

Oishi, however, appreciated AWCM as a regime adaptive to the current imperatives of the SCS dispute, noting that its mediation mechanisms are available both to the AMS co-claimants and China and Taiwan (2016). In contrast, Limaye argued that ASEAN was never designed to resolve the territorial contestation, citing differences among the AMS parties themselves as well as them comprising a minority of the organization (2018). In addition, Yu (2015) asserted that China is yet to be convinced by the other claimants of the benefits of such regimes.

b. Vietnamese SCS Strategies to ASEAN WOCM

i. Advantages

In spite of being admitted as the seventh member of the ASEAN only in 1997, Vietnam has exemplified valuing ties to the regional organization not only by participating but also by steering various intramural fora, navigating the SCS dispute through the ASEAN WOCM, as well as engaging traditional SCS actors, the US and China, and other external powers (ASEAN Secretariat, 2011; 2021; 2021; De Gurung, 2019; Hiep, 2019; Pham, 2019, Karim and Nabila, 2022; Chubb, 2020; Thuong and Oanh; Emmers and Huong, 2020).

Such is supported by the data, enumerating five (5) positive implications this time of the Vietnamese SCS strategies with that of ASEAN.

(1) Vietnam pushes for an actionable COC

The ICG underscored Vietnam's forging equitable deals among the lesser co-claimants versus China's exclusivist approach (2021). Hiep's study reinforced the previous studies by citing that Vietnam was with the Philippines when they initiated the COC SDNT formulation back in 1999. Vietnam pushed for the inclusion of four points, the chief of which is rendering the code binding among all signatories (2019). As Baviera pointed out, ASEAN's multilateralism is operational, as manifested by progress in the COC crafting (2013), an endeavor that Vietnam leads the membership in actualizing (Hiep, 2019).

(2) Vietnam honors ASEAN neutrality on the SCS dispute

Three studies (Tuan, Binh, and Huong, 2020; Nguyen and Nguyen 2021; Nguyen, 2019) and two respondents (KI No. 2 and KI No. 3) documented that Vietnam honors ASEAN neutrality on the SCS dispute. Tuan, Binh, and Huong, for instance, claimed that Vietnam's accession to ASEAN complemented the country's diplomatic direction: the Three No's and Hedging Strategy, which aims to protect Vietnamese sovereign interests and pursuit of diversification complement ASEAN's neutral stance in the SCS dispute and outward-looking diplomacy (2020).

Nguyen and Nguyen also noted that Vietnam's multidirectional diplomacy is in line with ASEAN's accommodating both the US and China as partners: however, they cautioned about elevating American ties to strategic partnership in consideration of China (2021). Nguyen further

argued that Vietnam upholds ASEAN neutrality and multilateralism by participating in the association-linked venues. This is supported by KI No. 2 when he stated that Vietnam regards the US and China as partners in maintaining peace and stability in the region. He opined that the US and China's leadership and power make them responsible for maintaining peace and stability in the region.

KI No. 3, on the other hand, observed that Vietnam acquiesced to US FONOPs to tacitly balance against China since the 2014 oil rig incident, which reflects the ASEAN norm of quiet diplomacy.

Relative to the aforementioned findings, Vietnam's Defense White Paper made it clear that the country cherishes ASEAN as a prime venue for geopolitical diplomacy and determines alignment based on reciprocity (Pham, 2019). Likewise, Ha and Le and Vuving stated that the CPV intends to involve itself with more actors, internal and external, to amass the maximum possible gains (2021; 2022). Chapman (2017) listed 16 countries that Vietnam officially recognizes as strategic partners that nurture its non-alignment and strategic autonomy.

(3) Vietnam leads ASEAN in managing the SCS dispute

KI No. 3 described Vietnam's assumption of leadership among the AMS co-claimants in the conflicted seas by maximizing opportunities inherent to its tenure in the ADMM Plus, the UN Peacekeeping Mission, and a seat in the UN Security Council.

The findings mentioned above are coherent with Karim and Nabila's study, which also noticed Vietnam's deepening involvement in various multilateral setups, specifically ASEAN and its related fora and the TPP,

while leaving a challenge for the AMS to foster regional unity in managing the territorial contestation (2020). Emmers and Huong's arrived at a similar assessment, saying that Vietnam has become the sole activist among its AMS peers with the Philippine retraction under a China-inclined Duterte (2020). Whereas their SWOT analysis agreed with the foregoing studies, Thuong and Oanh saw as threats to Vietnamese maritime sectoral leadership the incongruence between the AOIP and FOIP and Vietnam's possible foray into minilaterals, which could reflect poorly on ASEAN (2021).

(4) Vietnam can cooperate with the Philippines

Three respondents (KI No. 1, KI No. 2, and KI No. 3) supported the plausibility of this implication. KI No. 3, for example, has suggested that Vietnam and the Philippines collaborate to push for a pro-ASEAN COC, especially since Marcos Jr. is reinforcing ties with Vietnam. He added that both Vietnam and the Philippines must synergize their SCS approaches under the international law or a pragmatic agreement.

Further, KI No. 1 saw the possibility of Philippine-Vietnamese energy cooperation as a co-management scheme duly noting the aborted JMSU among Beijing, Hanoi, and Manila in the late 2000s.

KI No. 2 agreed with KI No. 1, adding that it should be coupled with a binding COC to protect the welfare of SCS stakeholders: The literatures in review affirmed Vietnam's and the Philippines' initiative to render a binding COC in the late 1990s, leading to the production of the SDNT in 1999 (Hiep, 2019; Thayer, 2011; 2016).

Likewise, entering joint exploration has been suggested by the three literatures in review. Emerging from Pham's interview with Vietnamese

officials is the country's plan to harness SCS as an energy resource among the claimants, which could stabilize geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific (2014). Arguing that the SCS energy resource has become central to Vietnam's maritime diplomacy, Tüter recommended a similar cooperative arrangement to benefit all of the littoral states as a way to pacify competition with an exclusivist China (2022).

In relation to the aborted JSMU among China, the Philippines, and Vietnam, Truong-Minh and Huynh clarified that the two AMS were cynical about entering into an agreement with China for its obstinacy to multilateralism and the international law. They concluded that Vietnam could be receptive to renewing plans for a future collaboration should China be more malleable to adopt these measures (2014).

(5) Vietnam exercises maritime military independence

KI No. 2 noted Vietnam's firmness in maintaining its independent SCS maritime diplomacy in contrast with the Philippines. KI No. 3 further observed that while Vietnam is prohibited from entering military alignment with other countries, its maritime military is more capable than the US-supported Philippines, which only recently began to strengthen its naval force.

Same observation is clearly pointed out by Le that Vietnam's enshrining augmentation of its naval defense to protect its SCS assets via its maritime defense modernization program to build the country's positioning as a naval power is noticeable (2013). Shoji also shared this observation about Vietnam's predisposition toward non-militarized confrontations in the SCS. He noted, however, that the country continues to

build maritime defense capability as a deterrent or leverage in negotiating and defending its territorial claims (2015).

Vuving remembered the 2014 oil rig incident where Vietnam stood its ground against China and gained support from the US and Japan, with whom the former “share the same objective of maintaining the balance of power that has kept the region in peace for the last two decades” (2014).

Shojj indicated India’s surfacing as Vietnam’s latest recruit to its range of middle power partners through a number of joint development projects in energy exploration and defense cooperation (2015).

The ICG report corroborated Shoji’s assumptions on the brewing Indian-Vietnamese military cooperation, which roots in forging of the partnership in 2007, India’s training of Vietnamese submarine crews since 2013, the signing of the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Cooperation for 2015-2020 and for 2021-2025, and New Delhi’s delivery of armament supply to Vietnam in several tranches (2021). Sakuwa substantiated India’s engagement with Vietnam as being fueled by its traditional rivalry with China and coordination with the US and Japan in the Indo-Pacific (2017).

The ICG reported that Japan regards Vietnam as a crucial piece in the US FOIP, allowing the latter to import defense equipment and technology to the former (2021). Shoji wrote that Vietnam’s maritime military resources are reinforced by Russia, starting from the 2009 agreement to complete the shipment of five submarines to Vietnam in 2016 and technical assistance in the AMS’s yielding of its first homemade patrol vessel in 2012 (2015).

Validating the above-cited data are seven reviewed literatures, the first of which is the 2019 Defense White Paper, which enshrined Vietnamese SCS military cooperation by adhering to the Three No's and the basis of reciprocity (Pham, 2019). These are applied by Vietnam to cope with its asymmetrical relationship with China through the Russian supply of submarines and Indian provision of training (Thayer, 2011; 2016) and support for the US and Japan's monitoring activities in the conflicted waters (De Gurung, 2018).

The same was noted by Chapman (2017), Ha and Le (2021), and Vuving (2022) in their respective papers, distinguishing Vietnam's partnership with Japan, India, Russia, and other countries as part of pursuing a multidirectional SCS diplomacy. Such is upheld by Baviera's study, which laid out the impact of the network of bilateral and multilaterals in the Asia-Pacific as a make-or-break situation for SCS cooperation (2013).

ii. Disadvantages

Undeniably, Vietnam's entry into ASEAN in 1997 widened the horizons of Southeast Asian regionalization—it signaled the socialization of a former enemy from the other side of the once anti-Communist fence in Southeast Asia, which mirrored the organization's living up to its mantra of unity in diversity. Given this development, ASEAN, however, embraced not only the rewards but also the constraints it carries toward the SCS dispute inherent to welcoming its seventh member to its fold. Two negative implications of the Vietnamese SCS strategies with that of ASEAN are discussed below.

(1) Vietnam challenges ASEAN-China relations

Five (Cotillon, 2017; Vuving, 2014; Shoji, 2015; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2021; Ong and Bandong, 2022) studies supported the plausibility of this implication. Cotillon, in particular, tackled Vietnam's confronting China's intrusion in its EEZ during the 2014 oil rig, which ignited hostilities against Chinese nationals in the country (2017).

Vuving, on the other hand, deduced from the similar incident how the maritime row worsened relations between China and Vietnam (2014). Shoji, on one hand, tackled Vietnam's opposition to China's infringement of its EEZ through military deterrence and amplification of negative domestic sentiment over the oil rig incident (2015). He added that the Sino-Vietnamese tensions alarmed the regional organization, which urged parties to observe self-restraint during the 2014 ADMM (2015).

Nguyen and Nguyen expressed their apprehension about Vietnam's engagement with the US as it would infuriate China, ASEAN's biggest economic partner (2015). In the same line of argument, Ong and Bandong have articulated further the risk an American-leaning Vietnam is bringing ASEAN as it would surely upset China, which the main trading partner among the membership (2022).

The aforementioned data is complemented by the results of Pietrasiak and Pieczara's study (2019). They established Vietnam's balancing against China and engaging the US to be causing factions within the association, especially its campaigning for the other AMS to uphold the 2016 PCA ruling that favored the Philippine petition over China's (2019). Contradicting this claim is Thayer, who in both his studies ascertained

Vietnam's hedging strategy is the AMS' reaction to its asymmetrical relationship with China (2011; 2016). Interestingly, Thuong and Oanh balanced the foregoing statements in their SWOT analysis of Vietnam's middle power-ship by stating that the country's freeing itself from China's economic grasp is an opportunity, while participating in QUAD Plus can be a threat coming in the form of the Asian giant's retaliation (2021).

(2) Vietnamese SCS activism might negatively impact regional order

KI No. 3 argued the unlikely consequences of Vietnam meeting China militarily over the SCS as it is impacted by the Ukraine War (2023).

Vuving is reminded of the Sino-Vietnamese 2014 oil rig incident as a precedent for KI No. 3's projection noting Vietnam's diplomatic trajectory growing synchronized with the US and Japan's and antagonistic with China's (2014). The Japanese connection is highlighted in the study of Sakuwa. He attempted to link the SCS and the East China Sea, which entangle Japan in the former through engagement with Vietnam (2017). He added that India, also observed to be concerned with China's expansionism in the SCS, is another case of the Asian powers enmeshed in the SCS dispute due to maritime military engagement with Vietnam and Japan (2017). This concern is shared by Shoji who cautioned about the looming partnership between India and Vietnam over SCS energy exploration and the attached navy cooperation that can provoke China (Shoji, 2015).

In the same vein, the ICG reported Japan's pulling Vietnam deeper into the FOIP orbit, in direct competition with China's CCD (2021). Several literatures in review attest to the credence of the assumed

implication as evinced by the foregoing data. First is Karim and Nabila's assessment of Vietnam's potential regional leadership in the Indo-Pacific, which concludes that Vietnam maintains a low level of attachment to the US and a high-risk geographical tension with China (2022). Next is Thuong and Oanh's SWOT analysis, specifying Vietnam's forging links to the US-led Quad can incense China (2021). Third, Tüter cautioned that Vietnam's SCS energy exploration ventures with non-claimants could fan China's militarized actions in the contested territories (2022).

Nevertheless, some studies have called into question such postulations. Case in point, Le interpreted under the lens of neo-institutional liberalism that Vietnam's multidirectional SCS diplomacy requires constructing ties with extramural partners, particularly the US and its allies, to deter China's expansionism in the conflicted seas (2021)—an idea that is also propounded by Pietrasiak and Pieczara (2019), Thayer (2011, 2016), and De Gurung (2018).

c. ASEAN WOCM to the Philippine SCS Strategies

This section discusses the positive and negative impacts of ASEAN WOCM to their Philippine counterparts.

i. Advantages

(1) ASEAN presents multilateral platforms for the Philippines

A study (Hoang, 2019) and KI No. 3 have concluded in unison that ASEAN offers multilateral platforms for the Philippines. KI No. 3, for instance, underlined ASEAN articulating neutrality in the SCS dispute by releasing the AOIP, which gears to enjoy support from both the US and China through

their involvement in the regional organization-led summits and comprehensive trading agreements.

Hoang also noted ASEAN's developing relations with Japan, which edged out China in terms of doling out infrastructural projects to the region, and India, which poses ASEAN's new source of leverage against China (2019).

(2) ASEAN enables the Philippines to cope with US-China competition

Two studies of Hoang (2019), and Ong and Bandong (2022), and the response of KI No. 1 signified that the intervention of a regional body has enabled the Philippines to cope with the US-China competition. In particular, KI No. 1 considered ASEAN maneuvering the Sino-American competition to enjoy the best of both worlds: China's economic prowess and the US military strength.

Hoang even stressed ASEAN's exercise of independence from China's overtures, such as its non-committal stance with the former's CCD, which is compensated by the regional organization through accommodating customary aspects of the Chinese vision of regional order (2019). Ong and Bandong also noted that ASEAN's initiative to secure US commitment in upholding international law in the SCS can balance out Chinese adventurism in the SCS (2022).

(3) ASEAN provides Philippines latitude for peaceful dispute settlement

Four studies (Ba, 2016; Han, 2023; Ong and Bandong, 2022; Shoji, 2015) have discussed about the avenues provided by ASEAN to the Philippines in peacefully settling disputes. Ba, in particular, illustrated the

pursuit of the COC as the 10-nation bloc's commitment to a rules-based regime as well as providing a "mutually acceptable solution" among parties (2016). Ba's argument is reaffirmed by Han when the latter noted that the COC negotiation reinforces cooperation between China and ASEAN and in better management of the SCS human-ocean regional system (2023). Ong and Bandong, on the other hand, indicated ASEAN's thrust to render an enforceable COC geared toward practicing neutrality amid the US-China competition by emphasizing non-militarization and self-restraint among parties (2022).

Likewise, Shoji highlighted the association's propensity to non-militarization of the conflicted waters, as evinced by the Chairman's Statement of the ASEAN Summit in 2014, which urged de-escalation of confrontational moves and contact through confidence-building measures (2015).

ii. Disadvantages

(1) Divided ASEAN SCS outlook riddles the Philippines in Sino-American bipolarism

Interestingly, the response of KI No. 1 and the findings of two studies (Southgate and Kho, 2016; Tan, 2017) touched upon the impact of the divided ASEAN SCS outlook to the Philippines in the context of Sino-American bipolarism. KI No. 1, in particular, raised the perception about the uncurbed Sino-American influence over ASEAN unity due to the divergent interests of its membership as some of the AMS aligned with China for economic benefits, while the others rely on the US for its security prowess.

In fact, the 2012 fiasco reminded Southgate and Kho of ASEAN's falling prey to China's exploiting alliance with Cambodia to hinder intramural consensus (2016).

In addition, Tan talked about ASEAN centrality being subordinated to the US-China power competition (2017). He continued that such a stumbling block extends to ASEAN-initiated venues ARF and ADMM Plus, where the US and China manipulate agenda to serve their own interests (2017).

(2) Chinese sway over ASEAN subordinates the Philippines to the China's hegemony.

In this aspect, there are two studies (Thayer, 2013; and De Castro, 2020) that talked about the swaying issue. Thayer, for instance, highlighted China's predisposition for bilateral setup with AMS co-claimants to infringe ASEAN centrality over the SCS dispute and put in jeopardy relations between the two sides (2013). De Castro, on the other hand, warned about the increasing Chinese pressure on military and economic fronts, as well as the BRI's impact on recipient SEA countries, to sway the direction of COC crafting to China's favor and solidify a Sino-centric order among ASEAN (2020).

i. ASEAN's institutions lack enforceable mechanisms

Regarding the lack of enforceable mechanisms, there are two studies (De Castro, 2020; Ong and Bandong, 2022) and a respondent (KI No. 3) that took note about this. In De Castro's opinion, the DOC can be considered only as a mere rhetorical reference to present a semblance of

cooperation among the claimants (2020). This point is further elucidated by Ong and Bandong. They clearly pointed out the association's weak binding mechanism as it has yet to institute coordinating mechanisms to address the dispute (2022). The observation of the two studies was further reinforced by the opinion of KI No. 3. He believed that the negotiations for the COC face uncertainties, especially the lack of institutional arrangements to resolve them.

c. Philippine SCS Strategies to ASEAN WOCM

This section discusses the positive and negative impact of the Philippine SCS strategies to their ASEAN counterpart.

i. Advantages

(1) Philippines upholds ASEAN's WOCM

Two studies (De Castro, 2020; Ong and Bandong, 2022) believed that the Philippines will uphold the ASEAN WOCM. Ong and Bandong appreciated the Philippines' broaching the SCS dispute with ASEAN while acknowledging the organization's neutrality during the Aquino presidency (2022). De Castro, on one hand, noted that the Philippine hedge was felt even in the ASEAN as the country lobbied for an astringent COC from a rhetorical DOC (2020). Further, he related how the Philippines utilized the association as a platform to deter China from its military advances in the disputed territories by focusing on the crafting of the COC (2020).

(2) Philippines refocusing on SCS dispute empowers ASEAN with additional leverage

This section is clearly present in the study of Ba (2016) and is present in the responses of three respondents (KI No. 1, KI No. 2, and KI No. 3). Ba recognizes the Philippine tribunal petition's role as a catalyst for other SCS co-claimants to seek international law remedies in approaching territorial disputes (2016).

The responses also contained the idea of additional leverage for ASEAN. In particular, KI No. 1 suggests that the Philippines' acquisition of the submarine signals its campaign to boost naval defense capability, aimed at increasing deterrent capability against China's expansionism. Same opinion was given by KI No. 3, who took note of the Philippines' implementing unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral SCS strategies.

Moreover, KI No. 1 considered the Philippines' leverage as a middle power or a "bridge" to the opposing great powers relative to the SCS dispute. KI No. 2 pointed out that the current Philippine administration is rekindling Aquino's responsive SCS strategy, which was deferred during the time of Duterte.

(3) Philippines can cooperate with Vietnam

It is also interesting to note that the three respondents also believed that the Philippines could cooperate with Vietnam in many fronts. KI No. 3 specifically suggested that Vietnam and the Philippines collaborate to push for a pro-ASEAN COC, especially since the Marcos administration is reinforcing ties with Vietnam. He added that both Vietnam and the Philippines must synergize their SCS approach under the international law

or a pragmatic agreement. In addition, such cooperation can further be enhanced according to KI No. 1 by exploring the Philippine-Vietnamese energy cooperation potentials. This recommendation is also shared by KI No. 2. He further opined that the cooperation should be coupled with a binding COC to protect the welfare of SCS stakeholders.

ii. Disadvantages

(1) US alignment might further lead to division in ASEAN

In the aspect of US alignment as potential dividing factor in ASEAN, only one respondent (KI No. 1) mentioned this. He believed that the divergent interests of the membership and the uncurbed Sino-American influence will affect the ASEAN unity. Such geopolitical alignment could be influenced by their ties with either party where some of the AMS aligned with China for economic benefits while the others rely on the US for security prowess.

(2) Inconsistent stance toward Chinese SCS policies

Lastly, the issue of inconsistent stance toward the SCS policies of China is mentioned in the responses of KI No. 1 and KI No. 3. KI No. 1 reflected on the incoherent Philippine stance versus China, accounting for foreign policy swings in line with administration changes—from a China-friendly Arroyo to a confrontational Aquino, then back to a China-disposed Duterte. Likewise, he acknowledged that the Philippines is required to engage China in managing its SCS claims. He continued that, regardless of the outcome of the Sino-American competition, the AMS must include in its diplomatic arsenal a response to China's actions and reactions. KI No. 3 shared similar belief with the first respondent. The inconsistency is vividly

noticed in the leaders' attitude to China as observed from the China-appeasing Duterte to the confrontational approach by Marcos Jr.

Summary

This research study, using QDA methodology guided by thematic and content analyses and the Meta-Nation State theory framework, assessed the Vietnamese SCS strategies, how they compare with that of the Philippines, and how both sets of strategies impact the ASEAN WOCM and vice versa. The Meta-Nation State theory attempts to understand international relations as interactions among state, sub-state, and supra-state actors (Mahiwo, n.d. a; n.d. b; 2014, 2015). The findings in Chapter IV revealed that Vietnamese SCS strategies can be categorized according to (1) engagement with the US, (2) engagement with China, (3) engagement with ASEAN, and (4) pursuit of multidirectional diplomacy. Also, they establish the Vietnamese SCS strategies as more independent, consistent, prepared, and outward-looking compared with their Philippine counterpart. Finally, they support the assumption that the Vietnamese and Philippine SCS strategies positively and negatively impact the ASEAN WOCM and vice-versa. Nonetheless, the findings suggested the possibility of Philippine-Vietnamese SCS cooperation.

Discussion of Findings

To answer the three research questions and the entailing sub-questions through the Meta-Nation State framework, the study employed a twin method of data-gathering, examining 23 research-based journal articles published between 2013 and 2023 under the topic of the SCS dispute from the perspectives of the US, China, ASEAN, Philippines, and Vietnam, and interviews of three key informants who are

specialists in Vietnamese, Filipino, and ASEAN studies. Below is a discussion of the research findings and how they addressed the research questions.

1. RQ1: Vietnamese SCS Strategies

The findings of this study revealed four major themes observed in the Vietnamese SCS strategies:

Theme 1: Engagement toward the US

Theme 2: Engagement toward China

Theme 3: Engagement toward ASEAN

Theme 4: Pursuit of Multidirectional Diplomacy

In the first theme, *Engagement toward the US*, the chief assertion was that Vietnam accommodated rapprochement with the US to reinforce its SCS hedging strategy against China. Attesting to this rationale for Vietnam's gravitation toward the US orbit of influence are earlier studies, which observed the increasing similarity between the US rebalancing strategy and Vietnam's deterrence of China in addition to the growing trade interdependence between both countries—a direction charted by the CPV to adapt to the Post-Cold War *doi moi* era (Ha and Le, 2021; Vuving, 2022; Pietrasiak and Pieczara, 2019; Thuong and Oanh, 2021). Aside from this, the data also supported the argument that this Vietnam's maneuver was not only designed to benefiting from American economic and security relations but also to accessing the US allies' help that support the FOIP program.

For the second theme, *Engagement toward China*, the data suggested that the Post-Cold War Vietnamese diplomacy assigned greater weight to addressing both China's rise as a global power and its SCS expansionism through the two-pronged approach of *struggle* and *cooperation*. This assumption is in line with the available

scholarship on the topic, stating that the enduring asymmetrical relationship between Vietnam and its neighbor in the north propelled the former to seek multidirectional foreign policy (Thayer, 2011; 2016; Ha and Le, 2021, Vuving, 2022). Similarly, the result of the study also highlighted the Vietnamese view of exercising caution against China as a modern empire bent toward encroaching in its EEZ, as it had done in the 2014 oil rig incident, while appreciating its favorable impact as a competitor for the US.

The third theme, *Engagement with ASEAN*, focused on Vietnam's accession to the regional organization, being spurred by the imperative to internationalize the maritime conflict and secure a multilateral approach to China. Research studies support the said findings by citing the AMS's no-nonsense campaign for the formulation of the COC and tethering China to various ASEAN self-restraint-invoking instrumentalities (Pham, 2019; Hiep, 2019; Truong-Minh and Huynh, 2014). Interestingly, the association aptly serves a springboard for Vietnam's leadership aspiration to promote its SCS claims. This behavior aptly captures the interaction exemplifying the state-to-supra-state channel of the Meta-Nation State theory.

The fourth theme, *Pursuit of Multidirectional Diplomacy*, entailed the perception of Vietnam establishing an SCS strategy involving a multiplicity of international actors. This observation came in the form of the country's employing the two-pronged method toward China, navigating the Sino-American bipolarism in the 21st Century, participating in multilateral venues, and soliciting support from other middle powers such as Japan. Such is likewise reported by Chapman (2017), Pietrasiak and Pieczara (2019), and De Gurung (2019). It could be noted that Vietnam is building a network of bilateral and multilateral relations to safeguard its sovereignty from any foreign power, thus, it engages the US and ASEAN to hedge against China, Japan to hedge against the US, and so on and so forth.

2. RQ2: Comparison between the Philippine and Vietnamese SCS strategies

Responding to the second research question, this study has enabled four points of comparison to surface, with a fifth theme theorizing cooperative prospects between the Philippines and Vietnam in managing the territorial contestation.

Point of Comparison 1: Engagement toward the US

Point of Comparison 2: Engagement toward China

Point of Comparison 3: Engagement toward ASEAN

Point of Comparison 4: Independent SCS Strategies

Fifth theme: Philippine-Vietnamese Cooperation

The first point of comparison, *Engagement toward the US*, discussed that the Philippines, due to its 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, has stronger, more enforceable affinity with the US than Vietnam, whose attachment to the US is still flourishing but maintains a non-committal partnership. This is consistent with the findings of Nguyen and Nguyen (2021) and Nguyen (2019). Aside from that, the data considered the concept of a Philippine-initiated minilateralism, which outcome is dependent on the backing of the US and its allies. However, the same could not be assumed of Vietnam due to its calculated engagement with the US.

In the second point of comparison, *Engagement with China*, Vietnam exhibits a more consistent binary approach of struggle and cooperation toward China than the Philippines, which is subject to the whims of the prevailing administration. The same pattern was cited by Phuong (2019) and Shoji (2015). One distinct finding of the study is the Philippine hedging against China which is anchored on the evolving human-ocean regional system vis-à-vis the complex international system. Also, the US versus Nicaragua case sets a precedent for the enforceability of the Philippine PCA triumph

against China. It serves as a beacon of hope of the possibility that China, to a certain extent, can be persuaded to yield to international law in the future.

Engagement toward ASEAN is the third point of comparison which covered the Vietnamese and Philippine efforts to utilize ASEAN and its related organs in forwarding their SCS claims. However, it appeared that Vietnam has a better edge over the Philippines in assimilating these opportunities to maximize chairmanship positions to its SCS advantage. In contrast, the data emphasized that the Philippines under Aquino epitomized vanguard-ship by asserting ASEAN independence in managing the territorial contestation as well as lobbying for an enforceable COC to deter China from its reclamation in the contested territories.

Point of comparison no. 4, *Independent SCS Diplomacy*, entailed Vietnam's in-place structure of multidirectional foreign relations and continuous reinforcement of its naval defense capability to guarantee freedom from any foreign sway, whereas the Philippines is still shifting its attention from a Duterte pivot to China to Marcos administration's refocusing on the SCS dispute and the recent acquisition of a submarine to flex its military muscle (Tuan, Binh, and Huong, 2020; KI No. 1).

The fifth theme, *Philippine-Vietnamese Cooperation*, explored the potential of such collaboration to deter China's influence in ASEAN as well as bring about energy ventures in the SCS. While a mutual undertaking by the Philippines and Vietnam in light of international law might be impossible, a pragmatic arrangement could be a win-win solution for both countries. Moreover, it was also observed that Vietnam working a cooperation with co-claimants could be a viable approach to China, together with the finalization of the COC as protection of their respective sovereignty in the conflicted seas. It could be noted that Vietnam's openness to collaborate with the Philippines emerged as the fourth advantage impacted by the Vietnamese SCS strategies to their

ASEAN counterpart. This could be seen as a strong indicator of Vietnam's willingness to engage another peer co-claimant, which is regrouping its efforts to stake its claims in the contested territory.

3. RQ3: Implications of the ASEAN WOCM-Vietnamese and the Philippine SCS strategies and vice versa

In response to the third research question, the study's content analysis has allowed for surfacing of eight implications indicating positive and negative reciprocities within the ASEAN WOCM-Vietnamese and Philippine strategies nexus. These connections are categorized in two sets wherein the first four implications are attributed to the ASEAN-Vietnam ties while the latter four are of ASEAN-Philippine reciprocation.

Implication 1: ASEAN WOCM is advantageous to Vietnam's SCS strategies

Implication 2: ASEAN WOCM is disadvantageous to Vietnam's SCS strategies

Implication 3: Vietnamese SCS strategies are advantageous to ASEAN WOCM

Implication 4: Vietnamese SCS strategies are disadvantageous to ASEAN
WOCM

Implication 5: ASEAN WOCM is advantageous to the Philippines' SCS
strategies

Implication 6: ASEAN SCS strategies is disadvantageous to the Philippines'
SCS strategies

Implication 7: Philippine SCS strategies are advantageous to ASEAN WOCM

Implication 8: Philippine SCS strategies are disadvantageous to ASEAN
WOCM

For the first implication, the regional organization's SCS approach benefits the member-states' by (1) providing access to multilateral management for the SCS dispute, (2) negotiating Chinese expansionism, (3) coping with the US-China rivalry, (4) achieving non-militarization and de-escalation of the maritime conflict, and (5) providing leadership platforms. Such are propounded by Chapman (2017), Thayer (2011; 2016), Le (2021), Pham (2019), and Thuong and Oanh (2021). Another promising finding is the opportunity given by ASEAN to Vietnam in maximizing avenues to strengthen its SCS leverage, such as engaging other middle powers such as Japan and India. On the contrary, it was apparent that another side to ASEAN neutrality or a call for self-restraint on the territorial contestation and even to the Sino-American competition is seen to be gearing toward appeasing China to secure its BRI and other economic benefits. This preferential treatment by the 10-bloc nation toward China, however, seemed to be unjustified, as reports indicate Japan is the biggest infrastructural development donor to the region.

The second implication delved into (1) how ASEAN diversity reduces Vietnam's insulation against the Sino-American competition, (2) how the association increases Vietnamese susceptibility to Chinese imperialism, and (3) how the regional organization's weak institutions fail to address the SCS dispute. The ICG (2018), Yu (2015), and Agastia (2021) supported these findings. Substantiating these points is the observed dichotomy between US-reliant members, where Vietnam is considered to belong to, and the China-leaning, non-SCS party members who are being exploited to hinder intramural action toward SCS dispute resolution, such as the 2012 Cambodian fiasco. The belief that a playing-safe ASEAN tends to produce rhetorical-only rather than pragmatic mechanisms also contributed to the perceived weakness of the organization.

In the third implication, the Vietnamese SCS strategies have enriched the association's centrality in five aspects: (1) campaigning for the COC's finalization, (2) upholding ASEAN neutrality toward the issue, (3) exercising regional leadership, (4) openness to cooperation with a co-claimant, and (5) maintaining an independent naval defense. Similar conclusions were reached by Hiep (2019), Ha and Le (2021), Vuving (2022), Karim and Nabila (2020), Tüter (2022), and Baviera (2013). As could be derived from the implication, Vietnam's enhanced maritime military might be perceived as counterproductive to its commitment to peacekeeping and self-restraint. However, there are quarters in Vietnam who continuously believed that having such capability building is essential in fortifying the country's deterrent powers for added leverage against China's SCS militarization. Also worth noting is Vietnam's application of one of the core tenets of the ASEAN Way—quiet diplomacy—in handling the 2014 oil rig incident.

The fourth implication has identified two adverse impacts of Vietnam's SCS strategies on ASEAN. The first one is that the co-claimant's activism hinders cooperation between China and the regional organization, while the second impact is the presage disruption of the Indo-Pacific order. These findings are aligned with the results of previous studies (Pietrasiak and Pieczara, 2019; Thuong and Oanh, 2021).

The fifth implication mentions the benefits offered by the regional organization to the Philippines in the context of the SCS WOCM: (1) presenting multilateral fora to engage other principal and enmeshed parties, (2) enabling the country to cope with the effects of Sino-American bipolarism, and (3) affording the AMS pacific relief in unentangling encounters relative to the maritime contestation, all of which are noticeably similar to the Vietnamese case.

The sixth implication cautions the Philippines of three adverse reactions of involving ASEAN in the territorial dispute: (1) it entrenches the country to the unabated rivalry between the hegemons such as the US and China, (2) it limits the agency of the AMS toward engaging China, and (3) it incapacitates one to address the competition with proper conflict management. These scenarios are similarly mirrored in the case of Vietnam.

In the seventh implication, the Philippines effects the following advantages to the ASEAN relative to the SCS dispute: (1) the country stands for the collective initiative to create WOCM mechanisms such as the COC, (2) Philippines' revival of US engagement for its part in the territorial contest lends better leverage for the regional organization in meeting China's demands, and (3) it strengthens the radiating call for intramural cooperation due to its political willingness to enter such an arrangement with its peer co-claimant Vietnam. Apparently, the first and third points converge with the Vietnamese positioning with ASEAN. Interestingly, the second point goes against the grain of the Vietnamese diplomatic dictum of omnidirectionality and ASEAN neutrality.

For the eighth and final implication, the Philippines becomes a recipient of two drawbacks pertaining to its engagement in the geopolitical entanglement: (1) pronounced US alliance could alienate its Chinese-leaning ASEAN peers, and (2) fluctuating posture vis-à-vis the Asian giant could negatively impact the regional organization's stance toward China. While the root causes are different, the uncalculated results of such actions point to outcomes similar to Vietnam's.

Overall, attempting to render a categorical assessment of the reciprocations among ASEAN and its member states, Vietnam and the Philippines, could prove problematic as outcomes vary from their respective vantage points, as demonstrated

in the foregoing discussion. For instance, the Vietnamese case manifests the double-edged effect of the regional organization's interaction with China as it provides Vietnam an avenue for claimant-to-claimant negotiations. Conversely, the disproportionate Chinese leaning of other AMS could mean a hostage situation of consensus-making where Vietnam's voice is reduced to a tenth of the whole. The same could be said of the Philippine situation. However, highly noticeable is the growing synchronicity between the ASEAN neutrality and Vietnamese omnidirectionality, while diverging from such phenomenon is the Philippines' renewed commitment to US rebalance. In the same vein, the Vietnamese and Philippine cases exhibit many instances of convergence in how they receive and respond to stimuli from ASEAN. Nevertheless, the results are indicative of the preservation of intramural SCS actors' agency in conflict management as the litmus test of how they perceive the abovementioned reciprocations. Also, this realization reinforces the Meta Nation-State Paradigm's interpretation that the multiplicity of actors acting in different planes of interaction makes for a unique relationship between state and non-state actors.

The table below summarizes how the findings of this study correspond with the research questions.

Table 9

Correspondence of Research Questions and Findings

Research Objectives	Summary of Findings
Identify the Vietnamese SCS-related strategies toward main players	• Vietnam engages the US to tether Western allies for a multipolar balance against China • Vietnam engages China by “cooperating” for mutual interests and “struggling” with its expansionism • Vietnam engages ASEAN for multilateral access to China and internationalization of the conflict • Vietnam pursues multidirectional diplomacy to enhance sovereignty and access to multipolar leverage

Research Objectives	Summary of Findings
Compare the Vietnamese with a Southeast Asian co-claimant's (Philippines) SCS strategies	• Vietnam remains non-committal to US alliance; the Philippines is protected by the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty • Vietnam exhibits a consistent approach to China; the Philippines' stance fluctuates with every administration change • Vietnam harnesses ASEAN better to benefit SCS campaign • Vietnam has established a diversified foreign policy; the Philippines is recently regaining US confidence and exploring partnerships with other countries • SCS cooperation between the two countries is probable
Assess the implications of the Vietnamese and Philippine strategies to ASEAN's WOCM and ASEAN's impact on shaping Vietnamese and Philippine SCS behaviors	• ASEAN WOCM benefit their Vietnamese and Philippine counterparts through: ○ multilateralization of the dispute, ○ cushioning effects of US-China competition, and ○ providing peaceful conflict management alternatives • ASEAN WOCM benefit their Vietnamese counterparts through: ○ bridging negotiations for the AMS and China ○ providing leadership platforms for the latter • ASEAN WOCM impair both the Vietnamese and Philippine SCS strategies as: ○ intramural disunity subordinates both countries to the US-China competition, ○ the 10-nation bloc makes them vulnerable to China's pressures, and ○ it has weak WOCM mechanisms for addressing the dispute • Vietnamese and Philippine Strategies benefit their ASEAN counterparts through: ○ supporting the COC campaign, and ○ acknowledging the possibility of cooperation • The Vietnamese SCS strategies benefit their ASEAN counterparts through: ○ upholding ASEAN neutrality toward the issue, ○ exercising regional leadership, and ○ maintaining an independent naval defense • Philippine SCS strategies benefit the ASEAN WOCM by augmenting organizational leverage by engaging its US alliance • Vietnamese SCS strategies impair ASEAN WOCM as they: ○ drive a wedge between the 10-nation bloc and China, and ○ cause disruption of the Indo-Pacific order

Research Objectives	Summary of Findings
	• Philippine SCS Strategies impair ASEAN WOCM through: ○ US rebalancing, and ○ fluctuating policy toward China

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a reflection of the research process by presenting the conclusions, the research implications, and the corresponding recommendations of the study.

Conclusions

Conclusions drawn from this qualitative study were:

1. Vietnamese SCS strategies can be categorized according to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's engagement with the US, China, and ASEAN, and its implementation of multidirectional foreign diplomacy.
2. Vietnamese SCS strategies toward the US allow Vietnam to counterbalance China's expansionism and solicit support from other Indo-Pacific middle powers.
3. Vietnamese SCS strategies toward China are defined by a struggle and cooperation hedging strategy that enables Vietnam to benefit from the former's economic auspices and cope with its hegemonic pressures.
4. Vietnamese SCS strategies toward ASEAN provide Vietnam access to multilateral management of the SCS dispute and negotiation with China.
5. Vietnamese SCS strategies have systematized multidirectional diplomacy to diversify the source of leverage in the SCS dispute, permitting the country to maximize gains from omni-enmeshment with multiple SCS actors while minimizing risk from a multipolar order.

6. The Philippines possesses a mutual security partnership with the US whereas Vietnam remains non-committal to such an arrangement.
7. Vietnamese SCS strategies toward China are more consistent in their approach than their Philippine counterparts, whose direction is determined by the incumbent administration.
8. Both the Philippines and Vietnam harness their ASEAN membership to forward their SCS interests first and in a rules-based order. However, Vietnam maximizes leadership opportunities better than the Philippines for similar purposes,
9. Vietnam implements a more developed, strongly structured, multidirectional SCS diplomacy, whereas the Philippines is just beginning to refocus on its SCS stakes.
10. An SCS collaboration between the Philippines and Vietnam is possible.
11. ASEAN WOCM are advantageous to both Vietnamese and Philippine SCS strategies in terms of (1) providing access to multilateral management to the SCS dispute, (2) coping with the US-China rivalry, and (3) achieving non-militarization and de-escalation of the maritime conflict, and to their Vietnamese counterpart solely in terms of (4) negotiating Chinese expansionism, and (5) accessing leadership platforms.
12. ASEAN WOCM are disadvantageous to both Vietnamese and Philippine SCS strategies in terms of (1) how ASEAN diversity reduces Vietnam and the Philippines' insulation against the Sino-American competition, (2) how the association increases Vietnamese and Philippine susceptibility to Chinese imperialism, and (3) how the regional organization's weak institutions fail to address the SCS dispute.

13. Both the Vietnamese and Philippine SCS strategies are advantageous to the ASEAN WOCM in terms of (1) campaigning for the COC's finalization, (2) openness to Philippine-Vietnam cooperation. The Vietnamese SCS strategies benefit their ASEAN counterparts in terms of (1) upholding ASEAN neutrality toward the issue, (2) exercising regional leadership, and (3) maintaining independent naval defense. Uniquely offered by the Philippine SCS strategies to their ASEAN counterpart is enhancing the organization's leverage through US rebalance.
14. Vietnamese SCS strategies are disadvantageous to the ASEAN WOCM in terms of the co-claimant's activism hindering cooperation between China and the regional organization, and that would ultimately presage disruption of the Indo-Pacific order.
15. Philippine SCS strategies are disadvantageous to the ASEAN WOCM in terms of (1) deepening division among the membership by way of harnessing its US alliance and (2) tarnishing progress in achieving a united stance through its fluctuating view of China.
16. The Vietnam-Philippines SCS strategies and ASEAN WOCM nexus, including the Philippines', substantiates Mahiwo's Meta-Nation State framework, supporting the existence of state-to-state and state-to-supra-state interactions relative to the territorial conflict management.

Implications of the Study

The findings from the study revealed significant implications for the management of the SCS dispute. This study attempted to arrive at an empirical assessment of the ASEAN WOCM and the Vietnamese and Philippine SCS strategies.

Such was achieved by conducting analyses of data from academic journals and interviews with topic experts. Accordingly, the contributions of this research to ASEANology are summarized as follows:

A major implication brought to light by this study is offering another look at the approaches practiced by the subject intra-ASEAN actors toward the territorial contestation. It has been learned that multidirectionality as an SCS management framework effectively works for Vietnam in embodying its CDS, which can be a pattern that its co-claimant, the Philippines, can adopt to better develop a consistent foreign policy protecting its sovereign interest from the pressures of Sino-American bipolarism. Also, the comparison between the Philippine and Vietnamese SCS strategies brought to the table the possibility of cooperation in harnessing the conflicted seas' energy resources. Such comparison also drew attention to the paradoxical evolution of their approaches to Chinese revanchism in the contested seas—that the Philippines, whose established amicable ties with China decades earlier failed to institute bilateral links of communications, whereas China's historical rival Vietnam successfully achieved such feat. Another angle to be considered is how the said analysis renders the Philippine PCA triumph and Vietnamese hedging tactic as a testament that lesser powers can counterbalance against hegemonic pressure. Also, the study was able to articulate the positive and negative impacts of ASEAN WOCM to their Vietnamese and Philippine counterparts and vice versa, which established the imperative for the regional organization to strengthen its dispute settlement mechanisms while gearing toward a rules-based order by considering its membership's interests. Further, the findings suggested that an inclusive Indo-Pacific system is being set in motion by the aforementioned developments, noting the

involvement of other middle powers and the correlation between the SCS and the ECS disputes.

The second implication comes in the sense that the outcomes of the study reinforce the applicability of Mahiwo's Meta-Nation State theory. The ensuing assessment led to the categorization of Vietnam and the Philippines' strategies toward other states', which falls under the state-to-state channel of interaction. The interface between ASEAN and Vietnamese and Philippine strategies, on the other hand, affirms the theory's supra-state-to-state level of interactions. Also, the study added to the existing literatures another perspective in addressing the research problem using a non-Western theory of origin, which enriched the endogenous viewpoint in ASEANology.

For the third implication, the study raises a number of opportunities for future scholarship that will fine-tune the approach to the research problems and better articulate both the topic and the findings. A quantitative or mixed-method take on the topic can be a worthy endeavor and complement the results of this study. Further, the analysis can be specified to focus on aspects of the SCS actors' strategies, such as their naval defense capabilities or management of fisheries and marine resources, which were barely addressed in the current research. The same can be said for exploring the mentioned minilateralism among AMS co-claimants or with external entities.

Finally, this research is limited mostly to a review of published studies, documents, and selected interviews of resource persons, on the SCS conflict management, and strategies of Vietnam and Philippines. There are other ASEAN claimants in the SCS — Indonesia, Malaysia, and to a limited extent, Brunei Darussalam. It is important for future research to examine primary sources and

interview key informants from the other ASEAN claimants in the SCS, including academic and policy specialists.

Recommendations

This study contributed to ASEANology a perspective of assessing the Vietnamese and Philippine SCS strategies and the ASEAN WOCM. However, further scholarly undertaking is needed to generate more knowledge that would serve as a foundation for policymaking toward SCS conflict management. In addition, the following are the recommendations forwarded by this study:

1. Theoretical

- a. Provide a conceptual framework to explain the interactions and actions of the SCS state and non-state actors — including the ASEAN, China, and the US, focusing on the naval defense capabilities and strategies of the actors.
- b. Investigate the status and possible cooperation on sustainable exploitation of marine resources, specifically the conservation and protection of fisheries areas.
- c. Examine further the human dimension of the SCS conflict.

2. Methodological

- a. Conduct research on similar topic using a quantitative or mixed-method approach to organize and analyze information on SCS interactions and strategies and generate the findings as a basis for viable recommendations.

3. Policy

a. ASEAN

- i. Press forward with negotiations with China on producing a binding rules-based COC.
- ii. Strengthen practical institutional cooperation mechanisms in ASEAN institutions such as the ARF, ADMM, ADMM-Plus, and the EAS.
- iii. Utilize the Annual Summits to release statements on the progress of SCS conflict management, censure violations of the DOC, and enjoin self-restraint among parties.
- iv. Uphold the UNCLOS and the PCA ruling as well as the AOIP in SCS conflict management.

b. Philippines and Vietnam

- i. Support the ASEAN-China COC formulation process by advancing the most equitable measures, not only for the co-claimants but also for the peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.
- ii. Pursue joint development and management of the SCS energy resources with other co-claimants.
- iii. Assert vanguard-ship in actualizing the ASEAN Way of Conflict Management toward the SCS dispute through participation in intramural and international fora.
- iv. Socialize the Chinese-leaning AMS to persuade them to increase the chances of their cooperation in enabling the regional organization to arrive at a consensus free from hegemonic influence on SCS conflict management issues.

c. Vietnam

- i. Actualize sovereign SCS diplomacy strategy by sustaining economic growth, exercising military independence, and maximizing leadership opportunities in the Indo-Pacific.
- ii. Maintain enhancement of military self-reliance through augmenting maritime defense assets to increase deterrence leverage against SCS hegemonic pressures.

d. Philippines

- i. Strengthen naval defense capabilities to gain better leverage against hegemonic influences in the SCS.
- ii. Build up a hedging SCS strategy toward China by developing further China-Philippines connections through establishing direct, high-level communication links while nurturing existing related bilateral relations such as the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty with the US and exploring diversification of its diplomatic networks with other Indo-Pacific middle powers, making the country “a friend to all, and enemy to none” while keeping its national interest intact through reinforcing its independent foreign policy.
- iii. Maximize positioning in international fora to be able to lobby for its sovereign interests in the SCS.
- iv. Enshrine a mechanism that safeguards the government’s commitment to protecting its SCS stakes regardless of administration changes.

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APPENDIX A RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Key Informant 1

1. How would you characterize the Philippine SCS strategy? What are the recent developments regarding this strategy?
2. During the presidency of Aquino III, the Philippines was mentioned in literatures as strongly advocating its space in the SCS. But in Duterte's term, this was flipfopped and developed a policy that is inclined to China. [How do you see this development?]
3. The Philippines on buying a submarine?
4. How is the Philippines coping with the Sino-American bipolarism? Has the Philippines been reaching out away from this dyad?
5. Do you think the Chinese BRI impacts the SCS dispute?
6. Since you have mentioned that the Sino-American bipolarism is spilling over to other dimensions of international relations, does it have any bearing on if democracy will flourish or not?
7. Regarding the contestation between authoritarianism and democracy, has it any bearing on the SCS dispute?
8. Since you have brought up ASEAN in the conversation, ASEAN is a major player in the SCS. [What can you say about this?]
9. In comparison with Vietnam, how does the Philippines fare in its SCS management?
10. Regarding natural resources, Vietnam is willing to share co-management of the bounties of the SCS. [How do you find this strategy?]
11. To what direction does the Philippine-Vietnamese relations head toward?

APPENDIX B RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Key Informant 2

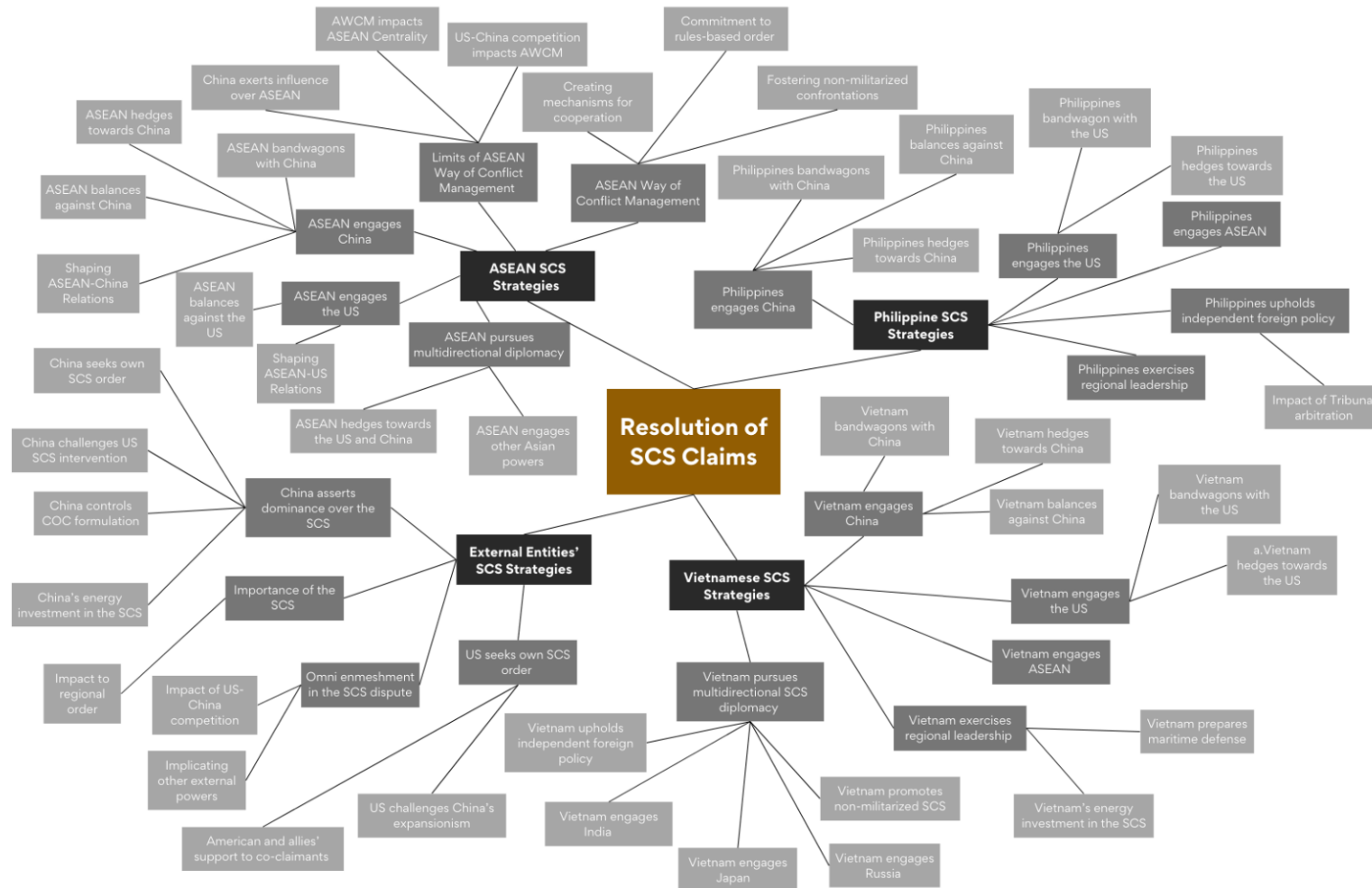
1. How would you characterize the Vietnamese SCS strategy? What are the recent developments on this area?
2. Does Vietnam use its membership in ASEAN to further its interest in the SCS?
3. With regard to the SCS issue, how does Vietnam cope with the US-China competition?
4. Are there other countries that Vietnam depend on in managing the SCS dispute?
5. What does Vietnam plan on harnessing the SCS resources, fisheries or natural resources?
6. Does Vietnam's authoritarianism impact its SCS strategies?
7. How do the Philippines and Vietnam compare in managing the SCS dispute?
8. What is in store for the future of the Philippine-Vietnamese relations?

APPENDIX C RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Key Informant 3

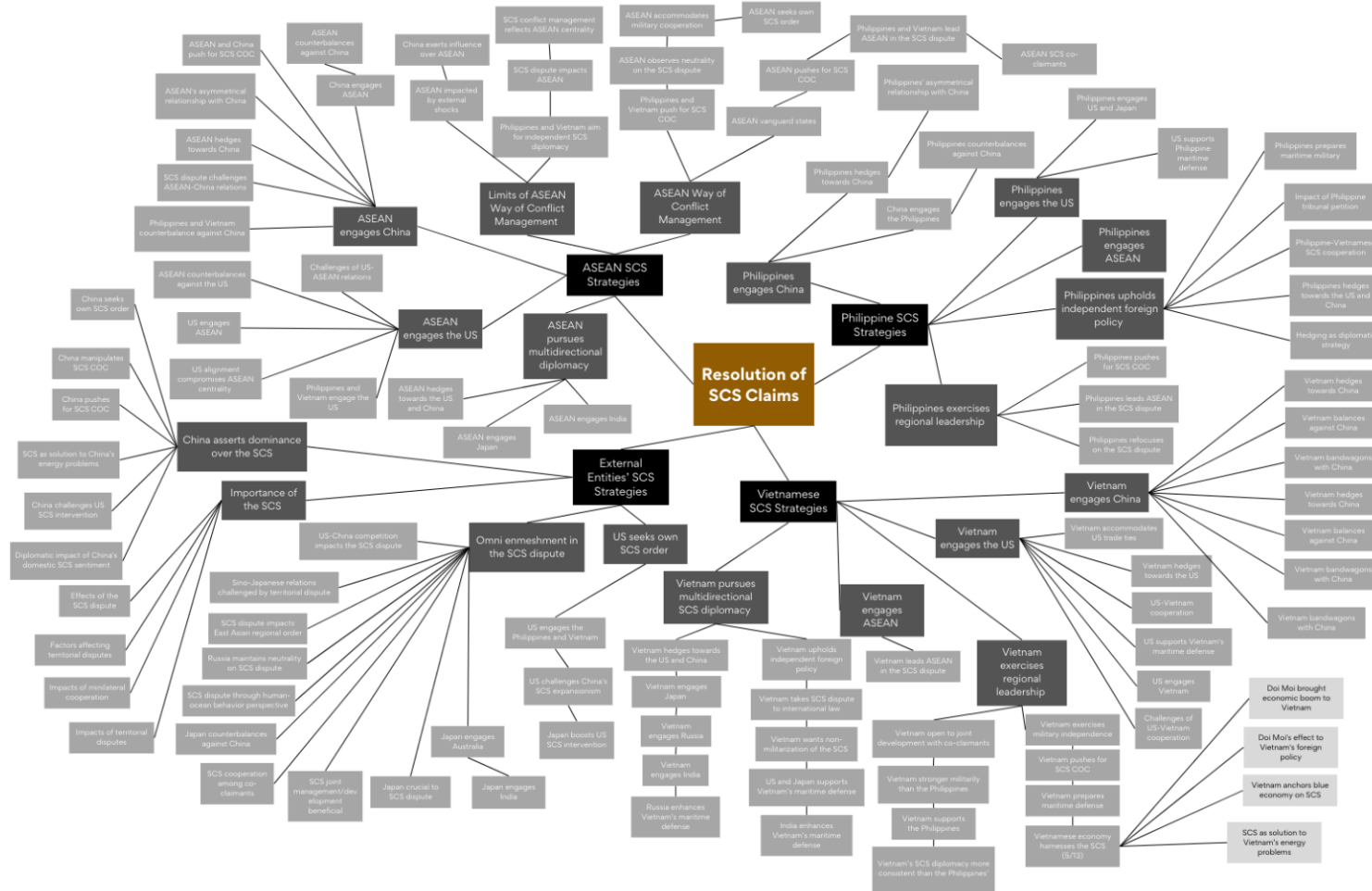
1. How does ASEAN impact Vietnam's SCS strategies?
2. In anyway, does Vietnam impact ASEAN SCS strategies? Because there are some literatures stating that Vietnam is vying to be a middle power, to use your own words, that Vietnam "is using ASEAN as an insulation."
3. How do you compare Vietnam and Philippines' SCS strategies? You have already mentioned about President Marcos's agenda.
4. Since you have mentioned the US intervention in the SCS, what can you say about the increasing US-Vietnamese connections?
5. Considering these outcomes, movements in the SCS, what is in store for ASEAN and specifically Vietnam?

APPENDIX D Initial Thematic Map



Note: Please refer to page 59 for the discussion.
Source: Prepared by the author

APPENDIX E Revised Thematic Map



Note: Please refer to page 59 for the discussion.
Source: Prepared by the author