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Understanding Southeast Asia's Hedging Behavior from a Neoclassical Realist Perspective: How Domestic Agency Influences the Great Power Alignment of Middle Powers

Pham Vu, Thieu Quang

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Bachelor Project: The Return of Great Powers

Thieu Quang Pham Vu (2483270)

**Understanding Southeast Asia's Hedging Behavior from a Neoclassical Realist Perspective:
How Domestic Agency Influences the Great Power Alignment of Middle Powers**

Instructor: Dr. Stephen Haigh

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Abbreviations

ARF – ASEAN Regional Forum

ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BOP – Balance of Power

CSIS – Center for Strategic and International Studies

CPV – Communist Party of Vietnam

FOIP – Free and Open Indo-Pacific

FTA – Free Trade Agreement

NCR – Neoclassical Realism

NTS – Non-Traditional Security

PAP – People’s Action Party

PM – Prime Minister

SCS – South China Sea

SLOC – Sea Lines of Communication

SEA – Southeast Asia

US – United States

Introduction

China's reemergence as a major power and its ensuing rivalry with the United States has led to structural uncertainties in the international system, with all signs pointing towards a fierce competition for hegemony in the 21st century. Nowhere is this more visible than in Southeast Asia (SEA), where the post-war regional order led by the United States (US) is being challenged both militarily and economically by China, who views the region as belonging to its traditional sphere of influence (Shambaugh, 2020). As such, secondary states in SEA often find themselves in conflicts of interest with the great powers, where maintaining a neutral position allows them to achieve the most optimal security outcome. Scholars have used the term "hedging" to describe this neutralist grand strategic direction around which states have constructed their foreign and national security policies, so as to avoid choosing a side. Hedging could be described as an insurance-seeking strategy for smaller countries during periods of power transition that combines counteracting behaviors of cooperative engagement and confrontational risk-mitigation with great powers (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019, p. 367).

While hedging is not unique to SEA states, the region is generally used to study this foreign policy grand strategy, due to its traditional alignment to the United States being threatened by China's growing regional influence in the Asia-Pacific neighborhood. In pursuing hedging, countries in the region seek to maintain the ambiguity of their great power alignment and preserve strategic autonomy – that is, the ability to pursue its interests and make foreign policy decisions without being dependent on any other power. Scholars seeking to advance the concept of hedging have largely focused on analyses of SEA states' relations with China and the US. Few have, however, studied the internal motives of these countries for pursuing the middle-ground strategy

of hedging, with scholars rather attributing these states' security behavior to the idea of external determinism that is central to neorealism. Countries are expected to craft their foreign and security policies purely in response to changes in the international system, and domestic factors have minimal effect on states' behavior. Neoclassical realists disagree with this notion, arguing that while states largely respond to the constraints and opportunities of the international strategic environment, there are also unit-level variables that can shape these responses (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell, 2016, p. 33).

This thesis seeks to contribute to the literature on hedging and great power rivalry in SEA by attempting to understand the behavior of secondary states, in particular middle powers, through a neoclassical realist lens. Middle powers are secondary states that possess greater strength and authority in their region than small powers and exert some influence in world politics (Baç, 2017). It investigates the role of domestic agency in shaping the foreign policy strategies of the region's two most prominent hedgers, Singapore and Vietnam. Domestic agency could be understood as the capacity of a country's leading individuals or institutions to make decisions that reflect their own will, but also under the constraint of a predefined social structure (Friedman, 2002). In doing so, the thesis aims to understand what motivates a state's great power alignment beyond its international security environment. The following research question will thus be answered – *how does domestic agency influence the great power alignment of middle powers in Southeast Asia?*

Literature Review

This section provides an overview of the vast body of literature relevant for this research, which can be somewhat grouped into four categories. It starts with a broader group of literature on how the Sino-American competition manifested in Southeast Asia. An assessment of academic discussions on regional attitudes to this great power incursion follows. The literature on the balance of power (BOP) is then discussed to understand the theoretical background of hedging.

Hegemonic Rivalry in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is currently at the center of a geopolitical shift taking place in the Indo-Pacific. Scholars generally agree that the region is now a locus for strategic competition between China and the US, with its geographic location being of vital strategic importance through the two sea lines of communication (SLOC) – the South China Sea (SCS) and the Strait of Malacca (Goh, 2007; Shambaugh, 2018; Stromseth, 2020). The SCS has substantial oil and natural gas reserves in its seabed and serves as a vital trade link for China, while the Strait is one of the busiest shipping lanes and trade routes in the world (Shambaugh, 2018, pp. 89-90). As over 80% of China's oil imports pass through these two SLOCs, having strategic control over these waters is seen as essential for China's energy security (Cordesman, 2018, p. 171). The Maritime Silk Road embodies China's vision to recapture maritime superiority in the region, as it envisions a Chinese-led economic and trade corridor through the SLOCs that links together SEA, South Asia, and Eastern Africa with China (Blanchard & Flint, 2017, pp. 238-239). Together with large infrastructure investments across the region, China's economic statecraft is seen as its most powerful tool to capture regional influence. Its economic foothold has spilled into the security nexus, where China exerts pressure on the region by being more assertive with its maritime

disputes in the SCS. China's naval capabilities have grown at breakneck pace, with a new generation of amphibious warships, submarines, and an aircraft carrier fleet under development that appears to serve as a catalyst for regional competition (Le, 2019). Military spending across SEA has developed rapidly in response, and Western scholars now see the military build-up of different state actors as a security dilemma that undermines the US-led security order in East Asia (Mearsheimer, 2010; Stromseth, 2020).

On the other hand, the literature on contemporary East Asian politics largely sees the US as a hegemonic provider of security since the end of the Second World War (Goh, 2007; Mastanduno, 2003). It has exercised leadership in SEA through smart power strategies, providing key public goods to countries in both the security and economic realms to support the region's development (Mastanduno, 2003, pp. 141-142). Economically, this included promoting neoliberal economic policies, guaranteeing access to international markets, allowing countries to buy US debt, and undervaluing their currencies to boost exports (Goh, 2022, p. 11). However, Khan (2012) finds that the US' lack of meaningful support in the 1997 Asian financial crisis compared to China's willingness to support the region's economic difficulties significantly undermined American economic power (p. 98). Further marred by the 2008 financial crisis and the US increasingly withdrawing its focus away from the region, its economic supremacy in SEA has declined relative to China's growing economic influence. This contrasts with the US' hegemonic position in the diplomatic and security sphere, which is still unchallenged (Goh, 2022, pp. 9-11). Shambaugh (2018) assesses that the US continues to maintain a regional strategic toolbox that consists of a hub-and-spoke alliance system through treaty partnerships with several Southeast Asian states, various civilian and military assistance programs, and a powerful diplomatic presence (pp. 110-

112). With this context in mind, Goh (2007) argues that the US' level of commitment to managing the regional security order is the greatest source of uncertainty for SEA states, as this has varied over past decades under different presidential administrations (pp. 359-360). Policies under the Obama administration have demonstrated a clear "US pivot" to SEA by positioning it at the center of the US' global strategic outlook (Shambaugh, 2013, pp. 11-13). The Trump administration continued this trend by promoting a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which explicitly challenged China's growing influence (Stromseth, 2021, pp. 1-2). As countries in the region question the durability of this commitment, however, maintaining a middle-ground position may still better guarantee their security.

Regional Attitudes on Great Power Competition

Academic analyses on the contemporary great power rivalry Southeast Asia largely espouse a consensus, that SEA nations capitalize on the Sino-American rivalry to achieve their national interests. They often do so by pursuing security arrangements with the US while engaging with China economically. However, an ASEAN Studies Center (ASC) survey found that SEA bureaucrats and academics generally perceive China's growing regional influence negatively, and are in favor of greater American commitment to the region (Mun, Ha, Qian, Ong & Thao, 2020, p. 2). Goh (2008) argues that SEA states often sought to leverage American power to influence the development of the region's security order in a way that maximizes their own interests (p. 355). Khan (2012) also sees that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc is collectively balancing economic interdependence with China through initiatives such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to encourage other external powers in supporting the region.

Several scholars attribute Southeast Asia's strategic outlook to its geographic location and history as a crossroads for greater civilizations (Gill, Goh & Huang, 2016; Ginsburg, 2005; Shambaugh, 2018; Stuart-Fox, 2004). Countries in the region acknowledge that they will inevitably be tied to the ambitions of great powers, having been historically dominated by Imperial China under its tribute system for centuries before being colonized by European powers. Ginsburg (2005) argued that the colonial chapter in SEA history substantially shaped their nation-building processes in the 20th century (p. 420). Powerful national identities were formed from nationalist struggles seeking to unite different ethnic and cultural identities under borders hastily drawn by European powers (Solomon, 1970, p. 5). Shambaugh (2020) believes that the region's extreme diversity has contributed to each country's own interests and agency (p. 4). Despite their differences, the region shares a collective identity of chafing against external intervention and manipulation, which significantly buffers the Sino-US rivalry and allows countries to seek strong neutrality in navigating among the great powers (Shambaugh, 2018, p. 89).

Consequently, scholars attributed the complex and fluid environment of regional politics in Southeast Asia to countries' historical struggle for statehood, which has rendered a contemporary attitude of individualism and non-interference across the region (Ginsburg, 2005; Shambaugh, 2018; Stuart-Fox, 2004). ASEAN embraces this non-intervening spirit through a form of sovereignty-reinforcing regionalism unique to SEA (Ginsburg, 2005, p. 420). Unlike many other intergovernmental entities, ASEAN has strengthened national sovereignty even further through the "ASEAN way" – which prioritizes decision-making through consensus, non-interference in domestic affairs, and voluntary cooperation (Shambaugh, 2020, p. 8). This has made the organization remarkably successful in maintaining regional peace and stability by

preventing any competition for hegemony within the bloc, allowing it to focus on working with external actors from the 1990s onward.

Balance of Power and Hedging

As the literature on the balance of power theory provides a theoretical context for hedging, it is essential to understand its basic assumptions. Since both concepts have neorealist roots, this subsection also demonstrates the relevance of the realist theories later elaborated upon in the theoretical framework. An integral component of international relations theory, it was incorporated into contemporary political thought through Kenneth Waltz's conceptualization of neorealism in the 1970s. Two forms of power balancing exist. The first, internal balancing, refers to a state's efforts to increase economic and military capabilities to maximize its power relative to other states, and the second, external balancing, refers to when states form security alliances with other states to counter the influence of a great power (Waltz, 1979, p. 118). The external BOP could thus be seen as an equilibrating process for secondary states to guarantee their survival in the face of a greater power that threatens its security. It proposes two contrasting strategies these smaller states could adopt when two or more great powers compete for hegemony – balancing and bandwagoning (Smith, 2018; Waltz, 1979; Walt, 2013). States that pursue balancing are distrustful of the challenger's intentions and uncertain of their security during power transition, thus seeking to preserve the existing regional order by partnering with the hegemon. This may come in the form of security arrangements with the hegemon to counterbalance the challenger. Conversely, bandwagoning is when states align with the challenging power in the belief of an inevitable power transition, thus ceding some autonomy in return for security guarantees from the challenger. Waltz (1979) noted that the first concern of secondary states in their decision to balance or bandwagon

is not to maximize their power by allying with greater power, but whether aligning with which power will preserve their power positions (p. 126). Secondary states are therefore primarily concerned with maintaining stability to ensure their security.

However, the literature espouses a different, but clear consensus pertaining to the behavior of Southeast Asian states. These countries' foreign policy strategies do not conform to either hard balancing or bandwagoning, but rather "hedging," a middle position that encompasses elements of both (Ciorcari & Haacke, 2019; Kuik, 2016; Lim & Cooper, 2015; Shambaugh, 2018). This is the first of three conceptualizations of hedging, one developed by Evelyn Goh to understand the behavior of SEA states. She sees the traditional balancing-bandwagoning dichotomy as incapable of explaining such behavior from secondary states. Thus, hedging is conceptualized as an umbrella term that encompasses different policies and attitudes in this middle ground (Goh, 2005, 2007; Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019). The second conceptualization expands on the first in the security dimension, where it perceives hedging as a form of alignment strategy that optimizes the risks and rewards of cooperating with a great power (Ciorciari, 2009, p. 168). Secondary states maintain limited alignment with the great power to guarantee their security, while preventing them from being associated with the latter's foreign policy positions or being required to fully commit towards supporting it militarily (Ciorciari, 2007, p. 11). This provides the smaller power with significantly greater autonomy in decision-making, and is therefore the rational option for states seeking to maximize their power and security.

The third conceptualization goes further by seeing hedging as a mixed policy approach, with the ultimate goal of providing deterrence between secondary states and a rising power

(Haacke, 2019, p. 379). Smaller states pursue engagement policies in the diplomatic and economic dimensions with the rising power, while seeking political-military reassurances from the hegemon (Lim & Cooper, 2015, p. 696). The latter comes into play when engagement fails to provide security for the smaller state, thus serving as a form of risk management (Haacke, 2019, p. 379). Kuik (2016) developed a spectrum to separate the extent of hedging behavior across three dimensions – military, political, and economic. Economic hedging – that is to forge direct commercial links with the rising power, where it benefits the smaller state economically – is seen as the true middle-ground position for secondary states. However, political and military hedging – to expand ties with the hegemon in these two spheres – are seen as “indirect” acts of balancing where smaller states favor the current balance of political power (Kuik, 2016, p. 502). As these conceptualizations do not explain hedging completely differently, but are instead built on another to expand its conceptual scope – they will be understood in complementarity.

The Literature Gap

In the literature described above, three notable gaps stand out. The first concerns the assumption of Western scholars that ASEAN acts in cohesion when dealing with the Sino-American rivalry. While they acknowledge the significant diversity and historical context of the region having shaped their differences in attitudes, this is not well reflected in their study of hedging across the region. Kuik (2016), Ciorciari and Haacke (2019), and Lim and Cooper (2015) rely on theoretical models that conceptualize different forms of hedging and classify countries according to these groups, but fail to look at countries’ individual behavior patterns. For instance, of Lim and Cooper’s (2015) four hedging models, three are drastic simplifications of the security options and trade-offs provided to secondary states, and the fourth only classifies whether countries are a treaty

ally with the United States (pp. 704-712). Shambaugh (2020) acknowledges this gap by classifying countries according to a hedging pattern developed from assessing the behavior of each country individually, resulting in a model where no more than two countries are seen as acting alike. This thesis therefore builds on Shambaugh's (2020) approach.

A second gap could then be identified, in that scholars have largely ignored the region's varying distribution of power in their research (Kuik, 2018; Goh, 2005, 2007). Southeast Asia consists of smaller powers, such as Laos or Cambodia, who have considerably less influence than established middle powers. They will have different and possibly more limited strategies options. Shambaugh (2018) assesses that these two former small powers have capitulated to Chinese influence, since doing so benefits them greater than to hedge (p. 101). The thesis addresses this gap by explicitly aiming to only extend its findings to states considered middle powers, instead of attempting to compare the strategic outlook of small and middle powers. This connects with the third literature gap, which is the primary concern of this thesis. While the three conceptualizations of hedging have yielded comprehensive understanding of hedging, none has attempted to bridge the gap between a country's domestic factors and its behavior on the international stage. Studies have largely focused on the nature of hedging behavior, rather than trying to explain what causes a state to hedge (Goh, 2005, 2007; Graham, 1998; Khan, 2012; Mearsheimer, 2010). As a basic assumption of neorealism, the distribution of capabilities in the international system is seen as the conditional motivating factor for shaping state behavior. This makes it allegedly unnecessary for scholars to study a state's motive for hedging when neorealism already provides a clear theoretical explanation. However, this view is mistaken, whereas neoclassical realism (NCR) incorporates key variables that can enrich academic explanations on countries' foreign policy strategies.

Theoretical Framework

As the thesis seeks to contribute to existing theories in the neorealist paradigm in which hedging is grounded, this framework will first discuss two primary theoretical strands of neorealism – defensive and offensive realism. It then expands on how NCR can contribute to academic discussions surrounding hedging by looking at unit-level intervening variables.

Defensive Realism

Two primary strands of neorealism can be identified – defensive and offensive realism. Both see systemic factors – such as the anarchical nature of the international system and a desire for survival – as the main source of influence for state behavior, but disagree on how this behavior plays out. The first, Waltz's (1979) defensive realism, assumes that states' primary concern is to maximize their security by preserving the existing BOP through defensive and restrained strategies (p. 76). It accounts for secondary states' motivation to hedge as a means for survival, where engaging in a security arrangement with the hegemon while maintaining strong relations with the rising power would achieve a regional BOP (Lobell, 2017, p. 10). Such is seen by defensive realists as a powerful guarantee for security, as doing so would give secondary states' room for maneuver in the regional order (Lobell, 2017, p. 10). This theoretical strand is therefore useful for understanding the nature of SEA states' individual responses to a rising China, and how they hedge by pursuing security arrangements with the US, but not China.

Offensive Realism

Meanwhile, Mearsheimer's (2001) conceptualization of offensive realism holds that anarchy in the international system – a key assumption of realist thought – provides strong incentives for

states to expand their power (p. 100). States will pursue expansionist policies to maximize their power whenever the benefits outweigh the costs, as this would put their relative power position above other states and ensure their survival through dominance in the international system (Taliaferro, 2000, p. 29). While defensive realism can account for the security-maximizing concerns of Southeast Asian states, it is clear that they perceive China's rising influence in the region through an offensive realist lens. As mentioned earlier, the ASC found that a large majority of policymakers in the region (71.9%) are deeply concerned about China's expanding influence (Mun et al., 2020). Offensive realists see expansion as "aggressive foreign economic, political, and military policies" (Lobell, 2017, p. 4) to alter the BOP towards one state's benefit at the expense of others – something China is seen as currently pursuing in Southeast Asia. It is capable of doing so due to having overwhelming power relative to the ten ASEAN states, which provides a strong systemic imperative for China to expand and dominate the region. This theoretical strand will thus be used to understand SEA states' perception of a rising China.

The Weakness of Neorealist Approaches

Leong (2021) found that the counteracting balancing-bandwagoning combination of hedging reflects its conceptual duality, where both defensive and offensive realism can explain different elements of hedging (p. 8). While defensive realism and the balance-of-power theory account for the security-maximizing concerns of Southeast Asian states, Mearsheimer's offensive realism explains the perception of Southeast Asian bureaucrats and academics towards China as a power-maximizing revisionist state pursuing a grand strategy of achieving regional hegemony (Mun et al., 2020). As such, hedging could be understood as an approach to foreign policy rooted in neorealism, as both theoretical strands complement each other toward explaining states'

motivation to hedge. However, the aforementioned literature gaps show how scholars who ground their research in either strand have not acknowledged the importance of domestic influences on foreign policymaking. NCR criticizes the excessive attention neorealists pay to systemic incentives, where states will craft policy responses purely according to systemic stimuli and nothing else. This ignores important factors at the domestic level that may significantly impact the nature of this response, of which Ripsman et al. (2016) highlighted four limitations to the neorealist model (pp. 20-25). All four originate from neorealism's assumption that states are functionally similar in how they act as unitary actors that always respond inflexibly to systemic pressures (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 24).

The first concerns leader perception, where state leaders may not always perceive systemic stimuli correctly. While the international system can present states with clear courses of action, leaders often face situations where they may misinterpret information, over/underestimate their relative power, and incorrectly identify options (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 20-21). Wohlforth (2019) also pointed out the importance of human agency in shaping state-level responses since leaders are individuals with distinct personalities and beliefs that may shape a state's foreign policy attitude (p. 2). This connects with the second limitation, where NCR see neorealists' implicit assumption of rationality as incorrect, as leaders do not always respond rationally to systemic stimuli (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 23). This may be particularly noticeable during crises, when Holsti (1979) argues that one's cognitive ability to process information may be particularly strained (pp. 102-110), resulting in potentially irrational decisions. The third limitation argues that the international system does not always present clear systemic signals for a state to recognize its threats and opportunities (Ripsman, et al., 2016, p. 21-22). In extreme situations, such as an armed conflict, states face a

clear and imminent danger that they can easily determine a response. However, in a competition for regional hegemony, the outcome of a secondary state's policy responses may not be so clear-cut. The international system does not provide clear information for a state on how to respond to such uncertainty, meaning that its foreign policy choices must also account for signals taken from elsewhere. Lastly, neoclassical realists see the fourth limitation of neorealism as; since states greatly differ in their domestic socio-economic and political conditions, they will differ in their capacity to mobilize state resources according to systemic imperatives. For instance, wealthier nations may better divert resources to mitigate an economic crisis better than a developing country, or a country may mobilize troops more efficiently than another. These four limitations undermine several of neorealism's core assumptions while recommending a new conceptualization of realism that better account for unit-level factors.

Neoclassical Realism and Domestic Agency

The NCR approach to hedging recognizes the importance of unit-level intervening variables in shaping a state's response to situations of strategic uncertainty (Leong, 2021, p. 9). It reincorporates classical realism's concern for domestic politics and institutions (Williams, 2004) and emphasizes how a country's foreign policy choices and strategic outlook can explain its security behavior (Ripsman, 2011), while maintaining neorealism's assumption that this behavior is primarily shaped in response to the circumstances of the international system. They argue that foreign policy is neither entirely influenced by domestic determinism as assumed by *Innenpolitik*, nor the external determinism central to the *Realpolitik* that realism was based upon, but rather in the middle, where external systemic stimuli motivate policy responses, and unit-level intervening factors shape these responses (see Appendix A). Under NCR, foreign policy could be structured

in a manner that follows Robert Putnam's two-level game, where state leaders must navigate between the pressures and constraints of their domestic political systems, as well as the international environment (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009, p. 7). While policymaking in Southeast Asian states has traditionally been exclusive to the domain of the political elite; who crafted and deliberated policies largely insulated from societal forces; it has greatly opened up for greater influence from the public and civil society. NCR is suitable for understanding how this change has shaped countries' foreign policy direction.

Three variants of NCR exist in the literature, where Type III is the most extensive in terms of scope and approach. Type I originated in Rose's (1998) first conceptualization of neoclassical realism, where it is used to explain anomalies that neorealism could not account for. Type II expands on the theory's usage by using it to understand the internal policy processes of a country's foreign policy choices and grand strategic alignments (Ripsman, 2016, pp. 26-31). They see that systemic/external stimuli are solely responsible for causing countries' policy responses, but three internal processes shape that response – perception, decision-making, and policy implementation. Both variants follow this model, but Type II greatly expands its explanatory power (see Appendix B). Lastly, Ripsman et al. (2016) developed Type III to improve upon Type II by theorizing a range of internal intervening variables. It incorporates four specific internal factors in the domestic sphere that influence the policy process, which are – leader images & perception, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions (see Appendix C). These variables could be seen as an inclusive attempt by Ripsman et al. (2016) to incorporate previous psychological, organizational, and institutional approaches to analyzing foreign policy into one singular model. They reflect the different constraints placed on decision-makers by institutions and norms, various

interactions between leaders and society, and how the difference in policymaking mechanisms between states can lead to different policy outcomes (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 59). Since Type III will be operationalized for the analysis, it will be subsequently referred to as NCR.

Methodology

To answer how domestic agency influences the great power alignment of middle powers in Southeast Asia, a most-different-systems-design (MDSD) research design is employed on two sovereign states to gauge similarities between these cases. As the NCR model provides four clearly defined intervening variables, they are operationalized into thematic groups to classify and analyze the data. Two variables – state-society relations and domestic institutions – are combined into one group due to the intertwined nature of political governance in the cases selected. An interpretative-qualitative content analysis is then conducted on the population of text collected for each variable. The justification for this approach lies in the inductive nature of the research question, which looks at the relationship between unit-level factors and a country's policy responses toward a particular issue in the international system. Systemic stimuli will be broadly understood as uncertainty in the regional order surrounding the Sino-American rivalry, as this is the primary motivating factor that prompts middle powers to respond by hedging. The analysis focuses on understanding the nature of the intervening variable in each country, how they respond to systemic stimuli, and how these responses shape the country's policy outcome.

Case Selection

Of the ten ASEAN member states, six could be classified as middle powers – Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, and Vietnam (Patience, 2014, pp. 218-221). These countries significantly differ in their political structures, geography, level of development, ethnic composition, and religious and cultural attitudes. However, only two could be considered balanced hedgers – Vietnam and Singapore – whose great power alignments fall in the exact middle of Shambaugh's (2018) alignment spectrum (see Appendix D).

Singapore and Vietnam share a common dependent variable, in that they both pursue a hedging strategy, but these countries drastically differ in their broader characteristics. Vietnam is a developing country where a communist one-party system governs over 97 million citizens and has a mixed-market economy primarily driven by secondary industry and services. Singapore, however, is an unconventional city-state where just over 5 million citizens live in a dominant-party parliamentary republic. It has a highly developed service-based market economy, often seen as the most advanced in the world – both for trade and commercial activities (World Bank, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2016). Societal attitudes on the Sino-American rivalry differ regarding their perception of a rising China, as Singapore maintains extensive societal ties with China through its large ethnic Han population, and its government generally supports greater Chinese engagement in the region (Hean, 2017). However, Vietnam continues to harbor deep suspicion toward China's intentions in Southeast Asia due to its historical attempts to dominate the former. Territorial disputes in the SCS have also aggravated relations between the two, but Vietnam's economic engagements with China have remained mostly positive.

The two cases' similarities come down to a shared foreign policy attitude that reflects a balanced hedging strategy. Both countries maintain strong defense ties with the US and are considered important partners by the US in the region in both the economic and security realm. Singapore is the US' largest trading partner in SEA, and the only country in the region that maintains a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) with the US (U.S. Department of State, 2021). Meanwhile, the 2013 US-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership guides relations between the two countries, which has enabled cooperation in the security sphere to bolster Vietnam's maritime security in the SCS against Chinese aggression (The White House, 2021). However, Singapore and Vietnam also extensively engage with China through strong trade and commercial relations, as well as regular diplomatic exchanges (Shambaugh, 2018, p. 102). The two cases will be studied side-by-side to gauge crucial similarities across the four domestic-level intervening variables and understand their association with the countries' great power alignment.

Analysis

Leader Images

NCR states that political leaders' perceptions will influence the country's foreign policymaking processes. The model shows that leader images are the first intervening variable in the domestic policymaking process (see Appendix C), as they can significantly influence a country's attitude to an issue before the actual decision-making process. Public statements and academic discussions are employed to study this thematic group.

As Vietnam seeks to portray its leadership as acting in unison, rather than influenced by any particular political figure, gauging the perception of leaders is difficult. Individual values may also be relatively insignificant due to Vietnam's leadership structure, where power is not vested in one leader, but rather divided across its four highest offices – General Party Secretary, President, Prime Minister (PM), and National Assembly Chair. Each position assumes a different role of leadership in the state organ. Individual views of leaders are discussed in the 18-member Politburo to reach a consensus before influencing the country's foreign policy agenda (London, 2014). This can be observed in the nature of speeches given by Vietnamese leaders in an international context, where they rarely diverge from a predefined narrative that shows a shared, common vision for the country. A comparison could be made between a 2018 interview with then-PM Nguyen Xuan Phuc regarding China-Vietnam relations (Dung, 2018) and a 2022 speech by current-PM Pham Minh Chinh addressing the Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) on relations with the US (Pham, 2022). Mr. Phuc stated that the Vietnamese leadership values its strong relationship with their fellow Communist Party in China, as a relatively similar political environment between the two countries has enabled regular and culturally familiar diplomatic exchanges that strengthen

bilateral relations (Dung, 2018). Mr. Chinh portrays an equally positive perception of Vietnam towards the US, where he primarily addresses the two countries' joint success in cooperating to enhance regional security (Pham, 2022). He also expressed Vietnam's desire to maintain the current comprehensive partnership framework, rather than to further strategic interdependence with the US, which the latter seeks to achieve (My, 2022). Such reflects the risk-averse nature of the Vietnamese political leadership in working with the US and China. Leaders ensure equal frequency of diplomatic exchanges and simultaneously push for stronger relations between the two powers, portraying a neutralist attitude where neither power benefits more than the other. Vietnam's leadership structure thus prevents the individual perception of any one leader to influence its policy response, but rather enables the country's collective leadership to deliberate and agree on a common position.

Singapore's technocratic governance structure has also created a political system where no one leader has complete influence on its policy agenda, while its dominant party system prevents opposition voices to interfere in policymaking processes. Its executive branch, the 37-member Cabinet, is headed by PM Lee Kuan Yew and consists of ministers and leading bureaucrats from the dominant People's Action Party (PAP). Leaders' perspectives on foreign policymaking follow the doctrine of Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, that is to "secure a prosperous sovereignty for its people" (Chong, 2006, p. 273-274) through diplomacy, discourse, and economic activism abroad. Its emphasis on internal discipline sees collective leadership and agreement among leaders as the basis for national confidence abroad, which deters external influences by portraying the country as united under shared nationalistic values (Quah, 2018, p. 7). These principles continue to embody the international outlook of Singaporean leaders on which its

foreign policy is constructed around. This extends to relations with great powers. Analyzing public documents from Singapore's foreign ministry, Chong (2006) found the country's perspective as seeking to accommodate the interests of great powers while fostering a cooperative and peaceful balance in the region (p. 274). PM Lee had stated "we do not want to choose between China and the US" (Kornelius, 2015) in a public statement that reflects the position of the country's leadership, and one could objectively assess that the Singaporean leadership perceives engagement with China and the US equally positive. Its strong engagement with China since the 1990s stems from Yew's belief that a powerful China will benefit the region's economic development through increased trade and investment (Foong, 2015, p. 214). Yet, it continues to confer its strategic allegiance to the US, as Singaporean leaders continue to perceive American military presence in the region as critical for safeguarding the small state's sovereignty (Foong, 2015, p. 209). In the diplomatic dimension, leaders maintain a sense of political pragmatism that sees China-US as co-equal great powers in the region, hence positioning the country in this middle position.

Strategic Culture

Defined by Lock (2017) as interrelated ideas and norms that shape the behavior of political entities, strategic culture refers to how collective cultural norms and expectations influence the strategic outlook of leaders, elites, and the public. The socialization and institutionalization of these norms define what constitutes an acceptable strategic option (Ripsman, 2016, p. 67). Even with systemic stimuli prompting a policy response from the state, strategic norms will deeply constrain this policymaking process (Stuart-Fox, 2004, p. 121). Official policy documents cannot adequately measure this variable due to its conceptual abstractness, but academic discussions provide a comprehensive look into Vietnam and Singapore's strategic cultures.

Le (2013) traces Vietnam's current strategic culture toward China back to recent historical experiences, when Vietnam pursued policies of hard bandwagoning or balancing towards China (pp. 338-339). Vietnam entered an informal alliance with China in the early 1950s to mitigate a historical security threat, but this bandwagoning relationship broke down following the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war. The war forged strong anti-Chinese sentiment among both leaders and the populace, resulting in a strategic shift towards balancing. As China attempted to isolate Vietnam economically and diplomatically, Vietnam allied with the Soviet Union, which provided security assurances and limited military assistance until its collapse in 1991. The Vietnamese leadership then acknowledged its most optimal direction was to maintain strong relations with external powers, while ensuring its strategic autonomy to prevent complete external security dependency, leading to the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations in the same year (Le, 2013, pp. 339-340). Its conflicting desires therefore motivate Vietnam's contemporary China strategy, where it would seek help from its northern neighbor wherever possible while resisting Chinese attempts at dominance. Adhering to this principle, Vietnam's strategic culture towards the US follows a similar direction. Unlike China, Vietnam's current attitude towards the US cannot be primarily traced to historical experiences such as the Vietnam War. Rather, relations are driven by (1) Vietnam's desire to strengthen its post-Doi Moi national development process by expanding economic ties with the US, and (2) a shared security goal to constrain China's military ambitions in Southeast Asia. Partnering with the US is seen as the most viable solution for Vietnam to counter China's growing influence (Le, 2013, p. 359).

Singapore's security doctrine is also crucially linked to historical experiences, where the circumstances of the country's independence and geographic realities have led to a strategic culture

shaped by a deep concern for survival (Tan, 2020). Being a small island city-state with few natural resources, Singapore's expulsion from the Malaysian federation in 1965 and the withdrawal of British forces in 1971 left the country significantly vulnerable. This has shaped the country's national security thinking being based around the principles of self-determination, non-alignment, and risk mitigation. Such is achieved by – (1) building good diplomatic relations with all, (2) pursuing economic diversification, and (3) developing human capital to fuel a competent bureaucracy and a service-sector-based economy (Nathan, 2015, pp. 282-283). Singapore's ultimate security mechanism, however, lies in its pursuit of maximum deterrence through conscription and fiscally unconstrained military spending, resulting in strong defense capabilities (Wah, 2000, p. 8). This strategic attitude has provided the country with ample diplomatic space and economic might to become a neutral and relevant middle power. It heavily spills over in the country's great power policies, where Singapore has pursued engagement with both the US and China, while often standing its ground on principled positions that reflect the country's interests (Tan, 2020). Owing much of its development miracle to the American-led neoliberal free market system, Singapore has always perceived US presence in SEA as critical to the city-state's economic and security stability (Ang, 2016). Its strategic culture is therefore centered around maximizing regional security through a comprehensive strategic partnership with the US, which it sees as a benign power (Foong, 2015, p. 209). Regarding China, Khong (2016) noted that Singapore does not see China as a significant concern for its security, but rather the two countries share a common interest in economic cooperation. As a result, Singapore could be considered China's most constructive economic partner in SEA, where leaders on both sides have lauded growing economic and cultural ties (CNA, 2021). Unlike Vietnam, Singapore is not directly

located next to China and has a more longstanding security partnership with the US, which may account for this attitudinal difference in security perception.

State-Society Relations & Domestic Institutions

Ripsman (2016) defines state-society relations as the various interactions between a country's central institutions and various socioeconomic groups (pp. 70-71). The degree to which societal actors are willing to support political leaders in foreign and national security policies will affect their ability to extract and mobilize national resources. While the power to allocate resources is significantly centralized in both Vietnam and Singapore's governments, leaders still need to maintain social cohesion by maintaining strong public support for policies. As domestic institutions are deeply intertwined with society in both cases, this sub-section combines the final two intervening variables into one thematic group. It explains the dominating role of the state and public institutions in driving policy forward, while assessing the impact of civil society on policymaking processes. Findings are gauged from academic discussions.

Vietnam's "strong state" structure allows political institutions to make decisions largely autonomous from society. Its Communist Party (CPV) has traditionally dominated public life through a pervasive administrative machinery that permeates and directs all levels of society (Koh, 2001, p. 369). While the Doi Moi economic reforms have created influential business actors, the CPV has continued to exercise its structural dominance in the country's sociopolitical sphere. Vietnam's civil society thus remains weak and largely uninfluential in terms of affecting policymaking processes (Kerkvliet, 2001, p. 241). Furthermore, most of the country's natural resources remain under the control of state-owned enterprises in a mixed-market economy system,

allowing the government to maintain a monopoly on resource distribution away from private actors. Influence from the educational sphere is also significantly limited, as Vietnam does not have an academic community capable of advising the government on decision-making processes. Its state-society relations are thus one where the state dominates society. This is further reinforced by (1) high levels of trust among citizens in the government and leaders, and (2) a belief that policymaking processes are so detached from society that citizens have little influence. However, this does not mean that leaders and the bureaucracy are completely impermeable from public life, and domestic attitudes toward the US and China illustrate such. Most Vietnamese citizens view the US favorably (76%) and see the government's greater engagement with the US as strengthening the country's economy (Devlin, 2015). Vietnamese popular sentiment, however, is fiercely anti-Chinese due to historical grievances and further fueled by the SCS conflict. This public discontent has been a great challenge for the CPV in its pursuit of balanced engagement with China, where nationwide protests in 2018 against the establishment of special economic zones that would allow Chinese investors to lease land on Vietnamese territory led to an unprecedented reaction from the government. Consequently, the law failed to pass Vietnam's legislative National Assembly, despite being agreed upon by the Politburo's political elites (Parameswaran, 2018).

Singapore follows a similar strong state model under the political dominance of the PAP, where the country's civil society has developed largely within a state-sanctioned sphere of public deliberation (Lyons & Gomez, 2005, p. 120). From the 1990s, the city-state's growing middle-class demands for greater political liberalization have led to the PAP embarking on certain democratic reforms to maintain positive state-society relations. Such has created a more permissive environment for social and interest groups to grow and interact with citizens, while preserving the

PAP's grip on power by maintaining domestic stability and ensuring the non-interference of these civil society groups and individuals in important policy areas. While the country's advanced free-market economy has created powerful corporate and financial interests, its incorruptibility means that the government continues to drive economic processes through significant interventionist policies, such as supporting local companies scoring high on innovativeness measures (Wang, 2018, p. 399). Singapore also houses the region's most vibrant academic community, where political research at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute provides policy recommendations for policymakers in Singapore and across Southeast Asia. This research is conducted largely free from government interference, providing an avenue for professional independent voices to indirectly contribute towards policymaking. Singapore's technocratic public service also enables professional voices to participate in all aspects of its bureaucracy, as subject expertise is highly valued across the country's domestic institutions. Furthermore, unlike Vietnam, Singapore's government does not face immense societal pressure in handling relations with great powers. The country's engagement policies with both China and the US are largely supported by a highly educated public that trusts its technocratic bureaucracy in driving Singapore forward to achieve its security-driven national interest in fostering greater cooperation while maintaining neutrality (Mun et al., 2020).

Discussion

The neoclassical realist theory posits that these four intervening variables influence a country's internal process towards crafting a policy response to systemic stimuli. They shape different stages of this three-step domestic process, where leader images first shape a country's institutional perceptions of systemic stimuli (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 34). Strategic culture contributes to

shaping this perception, but as a belief system embedded in societies, it also exerts an indirect influence on the decision-making and policy implementation stage of foreign policymaking. Meanwhile, both state-society relations and domestic institutions directly influence these two final stages. They provide a structural framework through which perceptions materialize into actual policy processes, which then transpire into responses on the international stage.

Analyzing these different aspects of Vietnam and Singapore's domestic agency has gauged several important similarities between the two cases. Firstly, both countries' centralized leadership structures mean that the individual beliefs of leaders do not matter as much as the collective perception of their political elites. While the organizational structures of leadership in Vietnam and Singapore differ due to their different political regimes, both countries have a highest leadership council – the Politburo and the Cabinet – where leaders deliberate their opinions before agreeing on a collective viewpoint, which then shapes the countries' official perception to systemic stimuli. In both cases, leaders strongly support a risk-averse, autonomy-protecting approach to maintain strategic neutrality between the US and China, which is done by appeasing both powers in certain policy areas. These similarities are also well-reflected in the analysis of Vietnam and Singapore's strategic cultures, where both countries' historical and cultural beliefs have influenced and constrained their contemporary security doctrines. Both countries have a security strategy of pursuing military cooperation with the US and economic engagement with China, sharing the belief that this ambiguous alignment position would optimally address their security concerns. In terms of state-society relations and domestic institutions, both countries draw their power to dominate society from a strong state model, where institutions impose over large aspects of public life. This enables the political leadership to make policies largely independent from civil society.

However, there is some influence from citizens and non-state domestic actors, particularly anti-Chinese sentiment in Vietnam pressuring policymakers to balance their engagement with China.

These similarities support the relationship posed by the research question, that domestic agency exerts strong influence on Vietnam and Singapore's alignment strategy towards the great powers. All four intervening variables show a pattern where perceptions and behaviors deriving from domestic agency toward the US and China resemble these middle powers' hedging strategy on the international stage. Given the difference between these two cases in their leadership and governance structure, the thesis has discovered crucial similarities concerning domestic attitudes toward great powers. These findings suggest that the relationship is valid, that there is a link between the domestic and international sphere of policymaking to which neorealist studies of hedging have largely ignored. It supports the assumptions of defensive realism in states' primary concern to maximize their security when faced with an uncertain BOP in the region. Vietnam's historical concerns against Chinese influence and both cases' willingness to pursue security cooperation with the US over China also substantiate offensive realism's assumption of a rising power's ambition to maximize its power and dominate neighboring states.

Conclusion

This thesis started by questioning how well-equipped neorealist theories are to explain the great power alignment of middle powers in Southeast Asia. Neoclassical realism provides a well-conceptualized pathway to better understand states' behavior by rekindling classical realism's belief that domestic factors shape a country's response to the anarchic nature of the international system. SEA states differ so drastically in their internal composition and institutional structure, that NCR could prove powerful in creating a better understanding of their response to the Sino-American rivalry. Studying the region's most balanced hedging states – Vietnam and Singapore – means that this thesis has high internal validity, as it provides an in-depth look at domestic-level characteristics that can be utilized for research in these two cases. It has moderate external validity, where findings could be extended to other middle powers in SEA, who also pursue a hedging strategy, but should not be expanded to countries outside the region where this great power rivalry is also taking place. SEA states are unique in that they possess characteristics that differ from anywhere else in the world, and scholars should acknowledge this reality. To further understand the impact of these domestic-level variables, the thesis invites future research that goes further in-depth with analyzing their individual impact on the external behavior of Southeast Asian middle powers toward China and the US. A qualitative case study that looks at these countries individually may successfully test the findings of this research.

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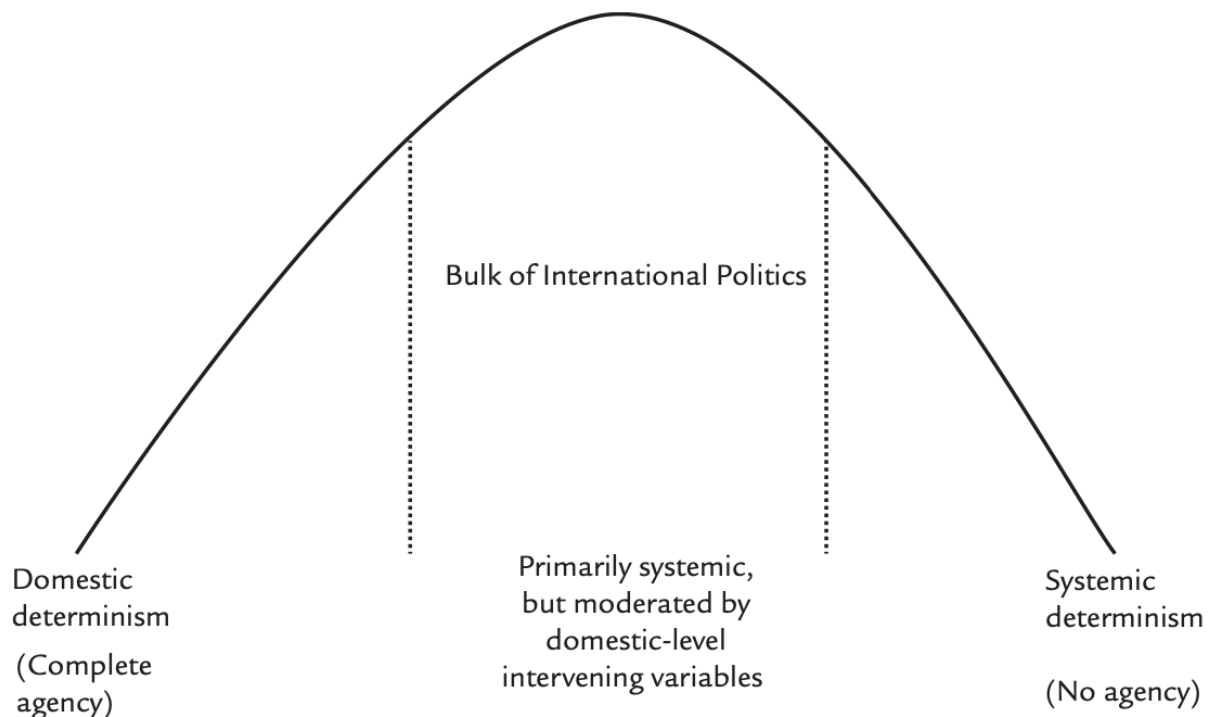
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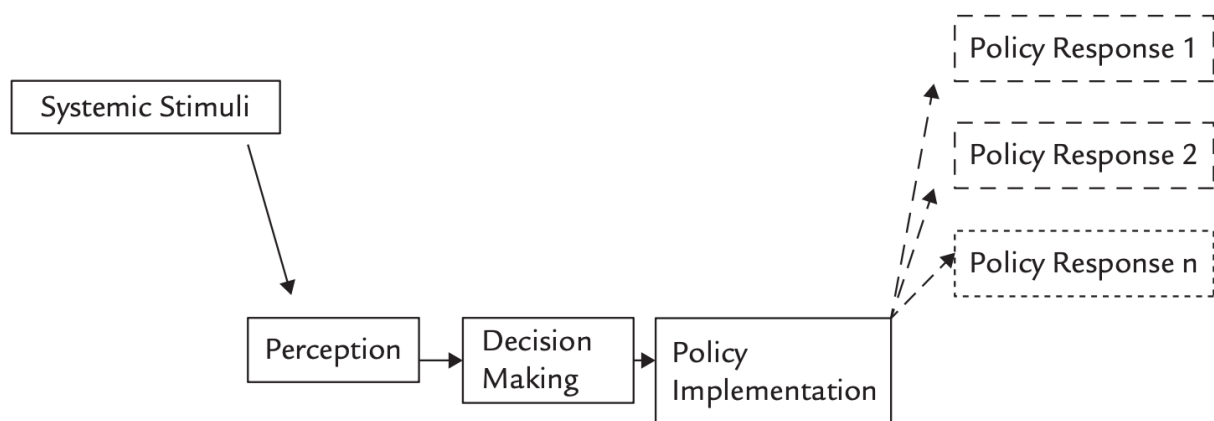
Appendices

Appendix A: Chart of Interplay between Internal and External Pressures on Policy Responses

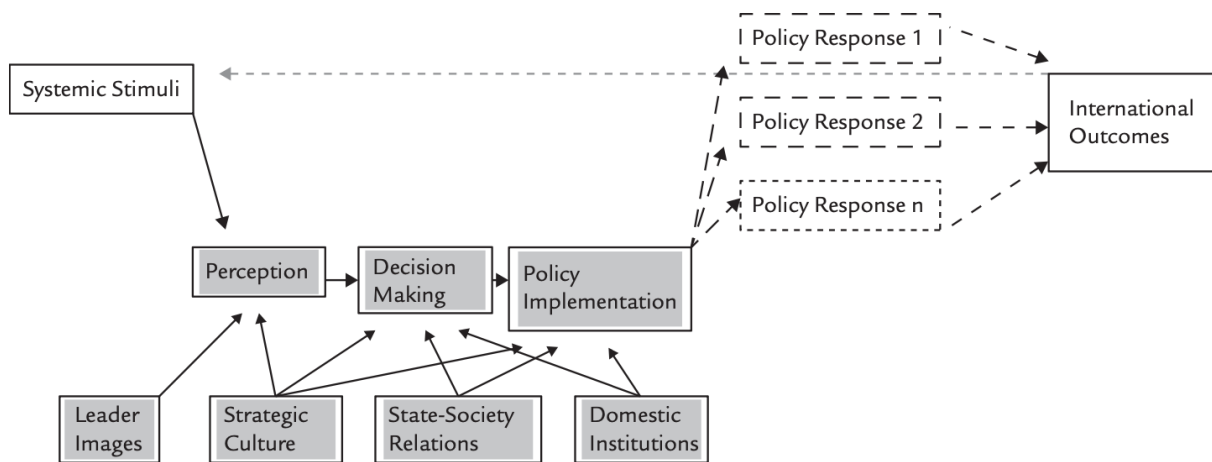
(Ripsman, 2016, p. 5)



Appendix B: Types I & II Neoclassical Realist Model of Foreign Policy (Ripsman, 2016, p. 31)



Appendix C: Type III Neoclassical Realist Model of Foreign Policy (Ripsman, 2016, p. 34)



Appendix D: Great power alignment among Southeast Asian states (Shambaugh, 2018, p. 101)

