



More than just hedging? The reactions of Cambodia and Vietnam to the power struggle between the United States and China in times of Obama's “pivot to Asia”

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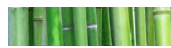
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Abstract

Southeast Asia is a major theater in the superpower rivalry between China and the United States. The states in this region face the challenge how to react to this intensified strategic competition. Some authors suggest a concept of hedging as the main behavioral response of the region. Nevertheless, critics argue that just one concept cannot incorporate all the variation in their behavior. They often name Cambodia and Vietnam as problematic examples – Cambodia rather bandwagoning with China and Vietnam being more a balancer than a hedger. The goal of this article is to create original operational definition of hedging that would address existing limitations through a comparison of the foreign policy of Cambodia and Vietnam during the US pivot to Asia during the Barrack Obama administration. This article finds that hedging can be useful to analyze the responses of Southeast Asian states despite the perceived contradictory stances of Cambodia and Vietnam.

KEYWORDS

Vietnam, Cambodia, China, hedging, United States



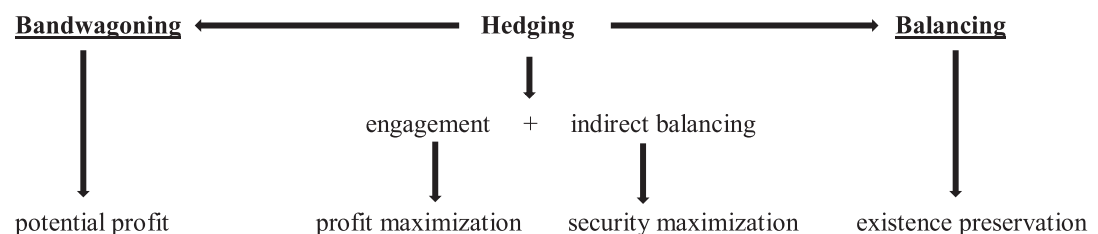
INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is a region, where the rise in power of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is apparent. Beijing aims at forming a Sinocentric sphere of influence as it pushes its ideas about a shape of regional order in an increasingly assertive way. However, its rise collides with a dominant position of the United States (US) that implements its version of a rules-based regional order in the Asia-Pacific in a form of the hub-and-spokes system. A region is also relevant to many US strategic interests that could be potentially threatened by China’s rise and prompt reaction from Washington, naturally. How do small states react to the situation? There is no agreement among scholars whether they balance against China, align with it, or bandwagon with it (Goh, 2007/2008: 115; Murphy, 2017: 165). Classical theories of international relations usually offer two possibilities as the answer— balancing or bandwagoning (Kuik, 2008: 160; Lim & Cooper, 2015: 701). In the case of Southeast Asia, some scholars choose a strategy of hedging instead. They understand it as a middle position and alternative to the previous two concepts that better reflect the interests of small states as they stand before the need to react to the ongoing changes in power distribution in the region (Tables 1–8).

My hypothesis is based on a presumption, that a concept of hedging can be used for explaining foreign policy strategies of countries in Southeast Asia toward the US–China power rivalry (for a simplification, the affiliation to the region is expressed by the membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations[ASEAN]). Here I follow in thoughts presented by Cheng-Chwee Kuik. He emphasizes hedging is an obvious choice for smaller states for two main reasons: First, pure balancing is not considered as strategically necessary, because the “China threat” is rather seen as potential than a real danger. Second, pure bandwagoning is considered too strategically risky as it restricts the freedom of conduct of those secondary states (2008: 159–161). I also draw inspiration from John G. Ikenberry, who claims “middle states” simply do not want to take a grand strategic choice. The established dual hierarchy, when the United States serves as a provider of security, while China offers interesting economic incentives, suits them best. For it is a strategic setting that gives them more space for maneuvering, bargaining, and pursuing their own goals as the two great powers compete for their political support. Policies leading to a strict hierarchy would give a leading state a monopoly on power and, therefore, limit their options. That is why, preserving the current power stalemate is in the interest of those middle states, and hedging strategy serves as a tool for it (2016: 34–36).

However, in my consideration of a setting and changes of the regional order, it is important to consider the objections related to two basic problems. The first one is expressed by an

TABLE 1 The concept of hedging scheme with tools and aims



Source: Author.



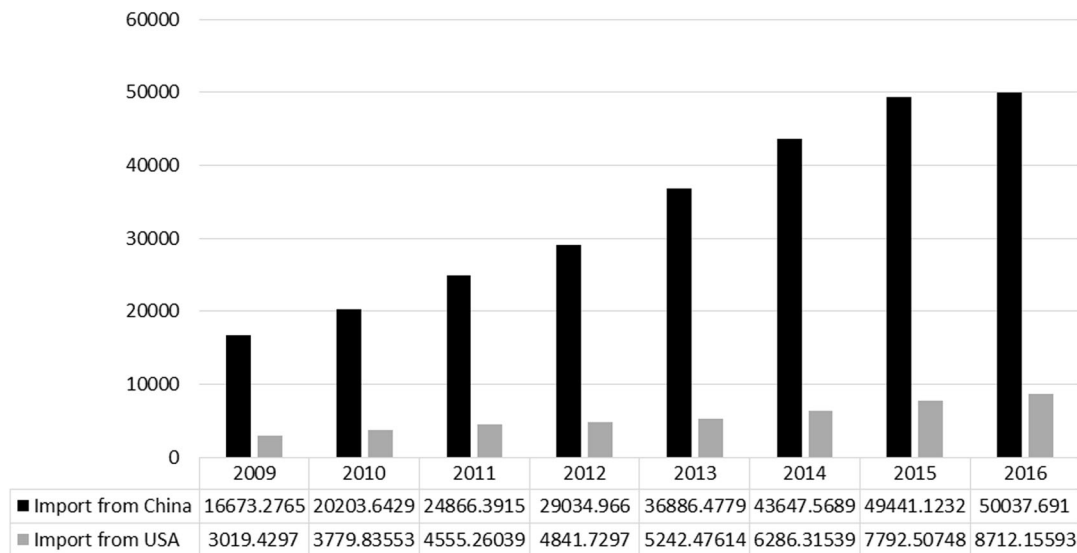
TABLE 2 Observed variables (table made by author)

Hedging	Existence of an official strategy or other document implying hedging	
	Profit maximization	Security maximization
	Target state	Hedge state
Sector	Tools (engagement)	Tools (balancing)
Political	International treaties of amity and cooperation with a target state; initiation/participation in international organizations with a target state; head of the state/government/member of government visits + mutual summits	Strengthening of amicable relations with other countries through international treaties (with hedge state mainly); summits and establishing of international organizations with exclusive membership (without target state, with hedge state); head of the state/government/member of government visits + mutual summits
Economic	Liberalization of mutual trade through the signing of international treaties; creation of cooperative international economic organizations or expert bodies with a target state; The volume of mutual trade + its direct (increase of export and import) with a target state; Increase of FDI; foreign aid	Liberalization of trade with a hedge state and other actors; creation of cooperative international economic organizations or expert bodies with exclusive membership (without target state, but with hedge state); the volume of mutual trade + its direct (increase of export and import) with a hedge state; Increase of FDI; foreign aid
Military	Treaties on military cooperation and consultations; initiation/participation in military drills with the exclusion of a hedge state; official visits and meetings of ministers of defense and chiefs of staff (or their equivalents); acquisitions and donations of military hardware + training programs	Treaties on military cooperation and consultations; initiation/participation in military drills with the exclusion of a target state; official visits and meetings of ministers of defense and chiefs of staff (or their equivalents); acquisitions and donations of military hardware + training programs; increasing of internal military capacity through military budget increase and acquisitions of military hardware; positioning against power and military activities of a target state
	Direction to bandwagoning	Direction to balancing

unclear anchorage of hedging, pointing out its insufficiently rigorous character in comparison to other concepts, which decreases its relevance as an analytical tool. The second one consists of concrete examples of foreign policy strategies of a few states. Their behavior in the international environment evokes either a choice of other more straightforward strategies or a long-term inclination of actors to the border poles of the balancing-bandwagoning spectrum. These facts hint at the time and functional limitations of hedging as a general and widely applicable strategy of Southeast Asia states.

I am going to focus my attention on just two countries, that are mentioned as prime examples of the inaccuracy of my hypothesis—Cambodia, and Vietnam. These states are situated on opposite poles of the balancing-bandwagoning spectrum. While Vietnam is

TABLE 3 Import into Vietnam in million USD



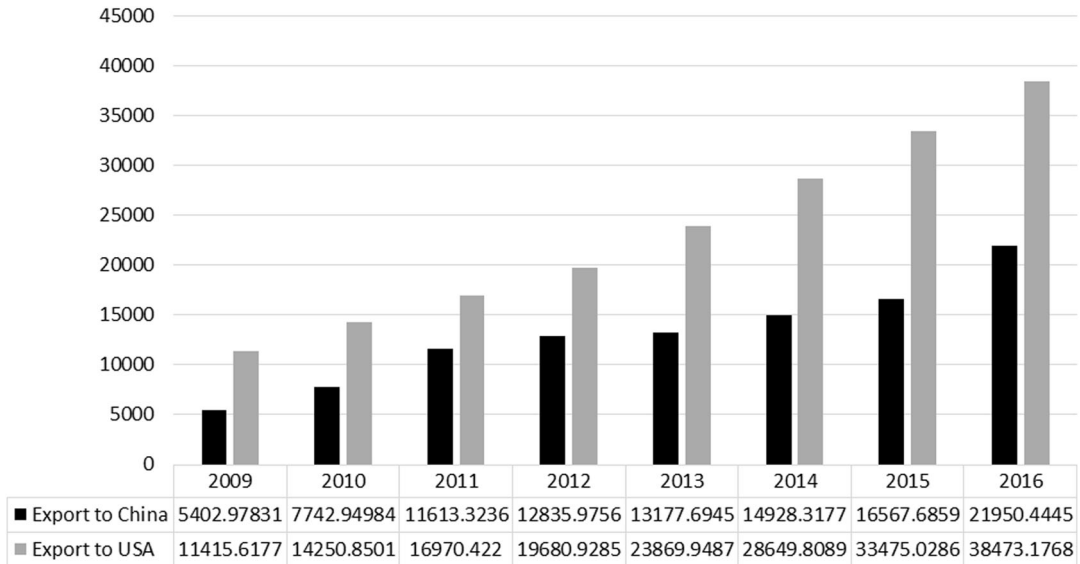
Source: Author. Data: World Bank.

mentioned as an actor heading to the balancing pole, Cambodia is considered as inclining to bandwagoning. This case selection is based on a choice of the least probable examples of following the hedging strategy from the whole group of Southeast Asian states. If my analysis detected elements of hedging in foreign policies of these disputable examples, my hypothesis would be approved, because there were no serious doubts expressed in cases of other states of that group.

Relating to the time demarcation, this article focuses on Barack Obama’s US presidential tenure (2009–2017), when the pivot/rebalance to Asia was announced. The reason is obvious—the move highlighted the opinions of some senior presidential advisors (associated in the “Phoenix Initiative”) that Asia should have played a central role in the US national security debate, declared the establishment of an “Asia-first policy” as a dominant paradigm and offered reaffirmation and expansion of security commitments to allies and potential partners in the region (Green, 2019: 519; Ikenberry, 2016: 38). What is more, it significantly enhanced the rivalry between the United States and China, as it “surprised Beijing and stimulated it to increase China’s presence across multiple spheres and countries in the region” (Shambaugh, 2018: 95). As David Shambaugh emphasizes, Chinese growing concerns were expressed by conveying the “Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference” of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee in October 2013. The unusual inclusion of the issue into the agenda of the platform reflected the importance of the American pivot for the highest echelons of the CCP (2018: 95–96). Simply saying, Obama’s rebalance not only announced the changes in US foreign policy priorities but also stimulated heightened Chinese activity as a reaction. That led to a significant change in US–China relations and the power dynamics of the whole Asia-Pacific region—marking a tipping point for the majority of actors. Southeast Asia and its power environment were no exception. The new collision of interests of the two great powers presented the small/secondary states there with three choices of reaction:



TABLE 4 Export from Vietnam in million USD



Source: Author. Data: World Bank.

- (1) Endorse the American rebalance and signalize alignment to the United States.
- (2) Oppose it and align to China.
- (3) Avoid any clear alignment and maintain its actions ambiguous (Lim & Cooper, 2015: 713).

That is why it makes sense to focus on Obama's presidential tenure. A succession of Donald Trump and Joe Biden then led to other changes in US foreign policy, that the Southeast Asian states had to react to with adjustments to their strategies. Nevertheless, any reflection of those changes would require a deeper analysis exceeding the scope of this article by a long shot. Thus, it is impossible to seize it analytically here. However, I am convinced this fact does not decrease the value of my research.

This article has two goals, reflecting the above-mentioned criticism. First, it provides a new functional operational definition of hedging, that would be rigorous enough to offer a relevant analytical usage. The second goal is to find out whether the reactions of Cambodia and Vietnam to the changes in regional order in Southeast Asia can be defined as hedging, or they are exceptional and can be potentially used as an argument supporting the criticism of the overly extensive application of hedging.

Is it possible to define the foreign policy strategies of Cambodia and Vietnam toward the United States and China in the years 2009–2017 as hedging?

Were the foreign policies of researched states following any specifically defined strategy reacting to the changes of power environment in Southeast Asia? If positive, did those contain elements of hedging?

What strategies did Cambodia and Vietnam use toward United States and China (in three researched sectors)?

What were the mutual relations of those strategies (were they complementary or contradictory)?