Article

Vietnam's Incomplete Middle-Power Identity: The Complexity of the 'Self' and 'Other'

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Abstract

Vietnam as an emerging middle power has recently become a topic of concern in both academia and policy-making. While in terms of capability and diplomacy, Vietnam has betokened the features of an emerging middle power, the aspects of identity remain ambivalent. From the empirical perspective, the regional literature on middle powers neglects the case of Vietnam as a middle power. Therefore, instead of taking positional and behavioral approaches to understanding Vietnam's middlepowerness, the article endeavors to adopt a constructivist prism to deeply analyze the middle-power identity of Vietnam. Two variables, including self-perception and other-perception are brought to the fore. The article aims to disentangle the puzzles of 'why has Vietnam been hesitant to self-identify itself as a middle power' and concurrently 'why have East Asian neighbors been slow to recognize Vietnam as a middle power despite its qualifying capability and foreign policy' by choosing Hanoi's Southeast Asian neighbors and China as significant 'others' to further understand the identity facets that make Vietnam a complete middle power. Using constructivism, compiling official documents and research works, and interviewing experts, the article concludes that objective, subjective and especially inter-subjective variables constrain Vietnam and the regional community recognize Vietnam's full middlepowermanship.

Keywords

Vietnam, Emerging middle power, Incomplete middle power, Self-perception, Other-perception

Introduction

Vietnam has recently been viewed as a regional power and a middle power due to its rising capability and diplomatic proactivism in multilateral institutions (Vu & Le, 2023).[1] However, regardless of the emerging literature on Vietnam's middlepowerness, Vietnam has been still discerned as an

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incomplete middle power, due to doubts about its identity (Emmers & Teo, 2018).

The deficiency of research papers and political discourses in the regional community has shown that Hanoi's Asian neighbors tend to be hesistant to ascribe Vietnam to a higher regional and international status.[2] This research puzzle has been based on the paradox that despite its qualifying capacity and foreign policy, Hanoi has rarely been assessed as an emerging middle power by the regional countries, in both official and unofficial channels. Southeast Asian countries and China's perceptions will be taken into consideration because those countries are in close geographical proximity to Vietnam and its top foreign policy priorities. Indeed, five out of ten ASEAN members (including Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines) are Vietnam's strategic partners, while China is its comprehensive strategic partner, Laos and Cambodia are special friends.

In addition, Vietnam's middlepowermanship has been questioned due to the lack of official discourses by state or party leaders.[3] That fact also creates the conundrum similarly. Although the rising status and proactive foreign policy line prove a middle-power stature, its self-identity is Hanoi's Achilles heel, making the country an incomplete middle power.

The aforementioned questions are designed and untangled concurrently due to the complex interdependence of 'self-perception' and 'other-perception' from the ontological perspectives, which will be interpreted through the following proposed framework. According to the article, answering one question without considering the rest is difficult.

Albeit the study of middle powers has recently enjoyed a renaissance in the International Relations (IR) discipline, throwing light on this ambivalent concept has remained an academic challenge. Applying IR theory paradigms, while the highlights of neo-realism and neo-liberalism are material capabilities and featured diplomatic behaviors of states qualifying as middle power, social constructivism offers an analytical framework based on self- and other-perception. That means middle powers are those who perceive themselves or are perceived by others as such. It should be acknowledged that eclecticism is needed but the article makes the case for social constructivism as the most relevant theoretical paradigm to answer the puzzle aforementioned.

The article briefly recalibrates the middle-power theory to define what constitutes a country as a middle power. Then, the paper goes through the constructivist approach to middle powers to design an analytical framework. Accordingly, two key variables, self-perception and other-perception, are used to elucidate Vietnam's (incomplete) middle-power identity. In the next section, the article sheds light on Vietnam's self-identity, its dilemma between self-assertiveness and skepticism and regional perception. Two puzzles are answered concurrently. Hanoi's ambiguity between smallness and middleness, regional norms and historical legacy result in Vietnam's incomplete middle-power status.

Theoretical Framework: Middle-Power Theory and the Identity-Based Approach

Since the Cold War when Canada and Australia took on that identity, 'middle power' has been in the spotlight of the academia and policy-making community. Despite receiving moderate attention compared to great powers, the increasingly high-quality scholarship on middle powers has been transforming the perception of the dichotomy of IR that always gives prominence to major powers and leaves middle powers to drift at the margins of the international scholarship (Shin, 2015).

As a mindmap, it is acknowledged that IR theories prominently prove their explanatory

power in parsing middle powers. Neo-realism, neo-liberalism, and social constructivism representing positional, behavioral, and identity approaches, respectively are instrumental to constructing the middle-power theory. The article does not aim at excluding any theoretical approach as an analytical eclecticism is needed in understanding middle powers that need to be re-conceptualized. Howbeit, it tends to shed light on the argument that while the extant literature seems to focus on positional and behavioral explanations, identity-based arguments are crucial and complementary in defining a middle power.

Positional Approach

The neo-realists categorize countries having material capabilities in the middle of the power spectrum into the middle-power group. Quantitative variables are often used to measure a middle power are economic size, income, trade, territory, population, military spending, human development index (HDI), and participation in international organizations (Emmers & Teo, 2018, p. 112; Ping, 2005, pp. 57, 66–68). However, this measurement is criticized as it fails to define what 'middle' means. Even though 'middle' is translated into 'statistically within the median range in terms of capacity' (Robertson, 2017, p. 359), it is elusive to accurately position 'middling' states in the international system of 193 recognized nation-states. Some so-called medium-sized states are believed to be 'great powers in disguise' (Gecelovsky, 2009).

Behavioral Approach

The neo-liberal scholars identify middle powers as countries conducting specific foreign policy behaviors associated with 'good international citizenship' (Cooper et al., 1993). Middle powers are considered to give priority to multilateralism, international laws, and the network of diplomatic relations in managing foreign affairs (Emmers & Teo, 2014, p. 192; Ungerer & Smith, 2010, p. 4). These low-cost strategies are affordable for such countries possessing limited capacity like middle powers. They serve the middle powers' national interests and help them avoid being dominated by great powers (Glazebrook, 1947; Pratt, 1990). It is debatable to claim that such strategies apply only to middle powers (Beeson & Higgott, 2014; Neack, 2000; Teo, 2022). One might counter-argue that a small-sized state might conduct a similar style of diplomacy. Furthermore, a country implementing this middle-power diplomacy might not feel pleasant to assume the middle-power role and status.

Identity Approach

The social constructivists build the concept of middle powers based on the assumption of self- and other-perception (de Swielande, 2019; Teo, 2018). As Robert Jervis points out, signaling and perceptions are two sides of the same coin in IR (Jervis, 1989, p. xiii). Soon-ok Shin designs an ideational framework based on the characteristic middle-power identity formation process, including self-conceptualization, self-identification, and intersubjectivity (Shin, 2016, p. 194). However, self-conceptualization and self-identification are not clearly distinguished from each other, making the paradigm ambivalent. In a nutshell, given the paper's emphasis on 'self' and 'other', the two crucial variables of constructivism, self-, and other-perception are formulized to categorize a would-be middle power.

Self-Perception
That means, first, a state seeking middlepowermanship must identify itself as a middle power.

Canadian and Australian decision-makers are believed to apply this approach to branding their national image as middle powers (de Swielande, 2019, p. 33).

The idea-based argument stems from the notion of identity. Ernst Haas contends, 'building the national identity is the crucial activity in rationalization because it allows the rulers to become legitimate, share power, raise standards of living, and administer the entire country effectively by giving people a set of symbols that make them subordinate their parochial and partial identities to the larger one' (Haas, 1997, p. 30).

By nature, the self-perception process is indeed answering the questions of 'what states stand for, what they aspire to, and what their values and interests are' (Shin, 2016, p. 195). According to classical constructivism, independent of social context, states have four 'national interests': to preserve and further their physical security, autonomy, economic well-being, and collective self-esteem (Wendt, 1999, pp. 235–237). The fourth refers to a group's demand to 'feel good about itself, for respect or status' (Wendt, 1999, p. 236). They aspire to self-respect before being respected by others.

In terms of expression, the aforementioned behaviors, from the neo-liberal framework, can be considered as dependent variables of this self-perception process. The self-perception assumes that understanding its identity helps a state determine its national interests and conduct in regional and global settings (Gecelovsky, 2009; Jepperson et al., 1996; Wendt, 1999). Sometimes, self-identity acts as a tool for policy-makers to justify their actions concerning the state's position, as Australia's speech acts to forge an Asia-Pacific Community (Wilkins, 2018, p. 55). The nation's rise and self-perception as a middle power have corresponded with its middle-power diplomacy in the international arena (Emmers & Teo, 2018). This strand of IR theory helps throw light on the paradox that some so-called middle powers based on the positional approach have not played a greater role in global governance while some countries dissatisfied the criteria of material capabilities have demonstrated their enthusiasm to conduct a style of middle-power diplomacy. What differentiates middle powers from small powers is their strong determination to play larger-than-life roles and rise from 'the rest' to be more powerful.

In particular, self-conception and self-interest are best illustrated in a state's foreign policy behaviors (Manicom & Reeves, 2014). It should be noted that a would-be middle power's self-identity is not only shown in the way that a state self-claims itself as a middle power in name because all the nation-states are equal from the international legal perspectives. The categorization of countries is legally informal but the accurate self-positioning will facilitate decision-making that is more in line with the new reality (Vu & Le, 2020). A country having both middle-power identity and interests will be expected to implement middle-power diplomacy to defend enduring state preferences and characteristics (Mares, 1988). Middle powers themselves do not want to be cognately categorized with small-sized power, thus seeking specific and alternative roles to frame their image (Cox, 1996, p. 245). The self is constituted by an organized set of identities (Burke, 1980, p. 18), which are considered auxiliary identities (Thies & Sari, 2018). Middle-power identity is associated with featured role conceptions such as an initiator, a broker, a coordinator, a norms diffuser (Lee et al., 2015, p. 5), a regional balancer, an advocate of development (Karim, 2018, p. 17), a convener, and an agenda-setter (Le & Vu, 2020), etc. It should be noted that diplomatic behaviors, while serving functional ends, are underpinned by a 'self-constructed' middle-power identity, typically as a 'good international citizen' (Cooper et al., 1993; de Swielande, 2019, p. 54). Based on the fact that middle-power roles are unfixed and various in forms, middle-power identity should be analyzed from broader and flexible perspectives that are not limited to the extant literature.

The rationales behind a state's self-identity mostly come from inter-subjective structures as social constructivists recognize their importance to state behavior (Hopf, 1998; Jung, 2019;

Wendt, 1992). Therefore, non-material factors such as historical experience, and domestic political culture are determinants of the self-perception process (Hurrell, 2000; Kowert, 2010; Shin, 2016).

Recent studies on constructivist-based foreign policy analysis have examined historical experience as a critical determinant that may elucidate the current role conception of states (Beneš & Harnisch, 2015). Historical experience can be treated as an intervening variable in constructing national identity because decision-makers usually invoke historical experience to justify their foreign policy agenda. While long-existing identity tends to be stable and continuous, newer proposed identities are inclined to be easily contested, suspected, and even rejected, especially if they are challenging the traditional ones (Karim, 2018, p. 352). Therefore, identity formation is also the process of compromise between identities. New identities to be constructed should not cause the state to the 'identity dilemma' situation (Li, 2014).

Alexander Wendt identifies two causal mechanisms, or 'pathways', through which identities are constructed, namely cultural (ideationalist) selection and natural (materialist) selection (Wendt, 1999). Therefore, techniques for measuring a self-concept are also quantitative (Burke, 1980, p. 18). States with more power are likely to re-identify themselves as more powerful states than the rest (Neack, 2003, p. 178). Therefore, a capacity-based approach is a starting point and prerequisite to constructing state's self-identity as a middle power. The notion of middle-power status fits with the sociological concept of ascribed status, in which the country is placed on a relatively fixed position based on its material attributes (Karim, 2018, p. 350). Furthermore, constructivists do not exclude material factors as corporate identity, one of four types of national identity, is constructed based on physical attributes. This type of identity refers to the intrinsic, self-organizing qualities that constitute state actor individuality (Wendt, 1994, p. 385).

In essence, social constructivists believe that identity is an active constructive process whereby actors can choose their own identity. The process of self-identity is rational and pragmatic as only identities serving national interests are placed on the policy menu (Williams, 2011). A state that wants to enjoy special and differential trading treatment builds its self-identity as a developing country. Another illustration is that an emerging power that does not tend to trigger the status-quo does not construct its image as a revisionist power.

When a state attempts to project a particular image, it must estimate how these signals may be viewed and recognized by the other (Pu, 2017). The desired outcomes of a state's self-identity as a middle power are the recognition of other states and the benefits arising from this being recognized (Patience, 2014, p. 211). In turn, the undesired outcomes of not self-perceiving as such may be taken into consideration, such as being treated as a weak power or a marginal partner of the international community.

Other-Perception

The state's identity is relational in essence. Self-perception is not merely sufficient, as identities are also shaped vis-à-vis others (Wendt, 1999, p. 327). Not only how states imagine themselves as great, small, or middle powers but also how 'significant others' (including neighbors, allies, and contenders) perceive that imagining influences the making of foreign policy (Patience, 2014, p. 211). Building on the constructivist framework, role theory emphasizes the significance of role conception (Holsti, 1970). Role conception is constructed through the dynamic interaction process of states in the international system (Karim, 2018, p. 350). By taking the view of the other, the self perceives itself. As the identity formulation is intersubjective, states tend to perceive themselves as how others see or appraise them (Wendt, 1999, p. 327). The exception occurs when some states are unwilling to be ascribed as such for some reason (Karim, 2018, p. 351).

The process starts with the state's self-perception conveyed to the international society through

non-verbal and verbal actions (Emmers & Teo, 2018). Other-perception is a critical measure of the efficacy of self-identity, which may be advocated or not. However, it should be noted that one of the aims of self-perception is receiving the recognition of others. In addition to domestic legitimacy, international legitimacy (Wight, 1977, pp. 153–173) matters as the regional and international community respond positively to self-identity. A state possessing a relatively limited military and economic capability but succeeding in having its identity recognized and respected may accumulate degrees of influence and power among its neighbors and outreach the region and globe (Patience, 2014, p. 212). As mid-tier states aspire to greater international status, they strive to gain international recognition as active contributors to international politics (Chapnick, 1999, p. 76).

Similar to self-perception, other-perception is the result of scrutinizing both material and non-material aspects of a would-be middle power such as hard and soft (comprehensive) power, foreign policy behaviors, shared values, and historical interactions. Self-identity of this middle power should be included in the formula as a determinant because identity formulation is often active as aforementioned.

As identity can be associated with the socialization process in the constructivist theory (Thies, 2012), the construction of identity is mainly conducted by significant others, such as great powers within the system, as well as international organizations (Karim, 2018, p. 352). In the case of middle powers, actors that have closer ties with the middle power would be expected to be more influential in its identity formation. Southeast Asian countries and China should be taken into consideration because they impact directly the strategic policy environment of middle powers. In addition, middle powers should seriously consider the perception of great powers, especially those being in close proximity to their location. Their counterparts, so-called middle powers, should also paid attention to because peer assessment matters in identity construction. That proves whether they are welcome or not to join the middle-power club.

While the formation of self-identity is by design, other-perception is dependent on external factors. Negative other-perceptions come from perceived disregard or humiliation by other states, and as such may emerge in high-level competitive interactive environments. In contrast, positive other-perceptions are the result of mutual respect and cooperation (Wendt, 1999, pp. 236–237). The other's responses are the input for the self to adjust its self-identity. Therefore, ego identity formation is an ongoing process during which the self- and other-perceptions dynamically interact with each other (Levine, 2003, p. 191).

The formulation of identity is the process of status- and role-seeking. Middle power's self-perception also wants status accommodation (Freedman, 2016), which means the approval of other peers. Status accommodation occurs when actors, especially those positioned in higher status, acknowledge the state's rising responsibilities, privileges, or rights through summit meetings, state visits, speeches, strategic dialogues, and so on (Paul et al., 2014, p. 11). Official narratives and academic analyses are utilized as important sources of other-perception. Influential academia has the power to determine whether a country is a middle power or not (Wilkins, 2018, p. 55).

By revisiting the middle-power theory and especially the identity-based approach as an analytical framework, the article comes to recapitulation that the constructivist strand which revolves around self- and other-perception is the complementary approach to defining a middle power. The formation of state identity is a circle in which the perception of the self affects the sense of the other and then be affected by the conception of the other. As constructivism brings the inter-subjectivity to the fore, it helps disentangle two important puzzles. The first one is while Vietnam has satisfied, to some extent, the basic criteria of a so-called middle power in terms of capability and behaviors, the state elites tend to be hesitant to self-ascribe the country as such.

The second question focuses on the paradox that states, especially those in close geographical proximity, seem to be slow to recognize the country as such. The article examines those countries as significant others. Objectivity is needed to answer the question, but under this circumstance, subjectivity and particularly inter-subjectivity play a greater role theoretically and empirically that will be utilized in the next section.

Vietnam as an Incomplete Middle Power

Contemporary discussions on the need to re-position Vietnam on the regional and global stage have been started since the last decade. It is because, after more than 20 years of Doi Moi (renovation), Vietnam emerged with a new stature, more powerful, and more proactive. Just like other emerging powers, the impetus for Vietnam to play a greater role at the regional and global level is a logical implication of its rising material capability and its recent diplomatic improvement. The country has been seen as the next generation of middle power (Emmers & Teo, 2018).

While Vietnam is believed to fulfilled all the criteria to be recognized as an Asian middle power (Jha et al., 2020), the identity is a disadvantage to its emergence as a complete middle power on the regional stage (Emmers & Teo, 2018). Compared to its so-called regional and global peers, both traditional and emerging middle powers such as Canada, Australia, South Korea, South Africa, Indonesia, Malaysia, etc., hitherto, Vietnam's regional other-perception as a middle power has been seldom and weak. The rationales behind that fact, through the interpretation of the aforementioned framework, are Vietnam's inconsistent self-identity (subjectivity) and other inter-subjective factors.

Self-Identity

It is until recent years that the concept of middle power has drawn attention to the elites and the public. The 12th (2016) and 13th (2021) National Congresses of the Communist Party mark a climacteric, showing the stature of Vietnam as an emerging middle power. This is the foundation for Vietnam to renew its status and identity. However, the fact proves that Vietnam has been ambivalent in self-claiming its new identity. While Hanoi has been conducting a style of middle-power diplomacy, it has been reluctant to the self-identification. To unravel the roots, this section focuses on sketching out specific aspects of Vietnam's middle-power identity and pointing out constraining factors that discourage Vietnam from self-ascribing as a middle power despite performing auxiliary identities of a featured middle power.

Auxiliary Identities of Middle-Power Identity

Through the adoption of middle-power foreign policies, Vietnam has assumed a variety of identities of a middle power such as a multilateralism promoter, initiator, catalyzer, agenda-setter, convener, rules-based order advocate, balancer, etc. These roles evince Vietnam's accumulation of a new identity that is more proactive and serves its national interests. Vietnam's well-known national brand of 'a friend, reliable partner and responsible member of the international community' initially fits the 'good international citizen' of a middle power.

As a non-great power, Vietnam self-perceives that it cannot act effectively without coordinating with the other. The conception of multilateralism has progressively evolved in policy and strategy documents. From 'more friends, fewer enemies' (Politburo, 1988) and 'being a friend and reliable partner of countries in the international community' (CPV, 2001), which are bilateralism-

favored approaches, to 'proactively and actively contributing to shaping multilateral institutions and the international political-economic order' (CPV, 2016), which is inclined much more to multilateralism, a token of middle-power diplomacy, the evolution in foreign policy-making mindset has shifted. The 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV, 2016) is the first time multilateral diplomacy has been adopted to become a key of strategic orientation in lieu of an implementing tool. Upholding the spirit of becoming a proactive participant rather than a passive observer, Vietnam has an aspiration to contribute to the betterment of public goods. Then, the Directive No. 25-CT/TW of the Party Central Committee's Secretariat on promoting and enhancing the role of multilateral diplomacy to 2030 is one of the most illustrative proof of Vietnam's self-identification of a middle power type-identity. Vietnam's foreign affairs at regional and international organizations 'strive to play a pivotal role, leading or mediating at forums, multilateral organizations of strategic importance to the country that is suitable to the specific capabilities and conditions of the country' (Party Central Committee's Secretariat, 2018). The foreign policy line continues to be adopted in the 13th Communist Party Congress (CPV, 2021).

Hitherto, Vietnam is member of various regional and international institutions. The country is also a dynamic contributor to the United Nations peacing forces (PKO), betokening a similar approach to other established middle powers (Le & Vu, 2020).

Starting from a multilateral practitioner, Vietnam has taken up other related roles such as initiator, catalyzer, convener, agenda-setter, and sectoral leader at various forums. Hanoi has performed auxiliary roles that serve as attributes of the middle power concept.

From the latecomer, with the pursuit of foreign policy activism, Hanoi proves itself as a linchpin of regional and international organizations. Vietnam is the initiative builder and the first convener of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), a mechanism achieving greater cooperation than older, more established multilateral platforms in the region. A variety of proposals related to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic such as the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies and Equipment, the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for Public Health Emergencies Response, etc. in the 2020 Vietnam's ASEAN Chairmanship is the embodiment of that self-constructed identity. At the broadly international level, Vietnam succeeded in putting forward the timely resolution for the International Day of Epidemic Preparedness, which was reached a consensus amongst 107 nation-states.

As a bridge, Vietnam helps bring neighboring countries to join ASEAN and ASEAN-led mechanisms. The 2010 Vietnam's ASEAN Chairmanship marked an expansion of ASEAN partnerships, including the United States and Russia joining the East Asia Summit (EAS), Canada and Turkey signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), and the FTA between ASEAN and Australia and New Zealand coming into force.

The identity of an agenda-setter and sectoral leader is best evinced in the Mekong case study (Vu, 2022). As the ASEAN Chair 2020, Vietnam has integrated the content of sub-regional cooperation into the joint agenda of the ASEAN (ASEAN, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). In tandem with Thailand, who revived the Ayeyarwady - Chao Phraya - Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) in the 2019 ASEAN Chairmanship, Vietnam is a country with the highest political determination to make the Mekong a common concern of ASEAN (Pongsudhirak, 2020). Another illustration is Vietnam's performance as one of the most open economies in the region (Vo, 2015). With the trade value twice as much as the GDP, this non-capitalist country is currently a signatory to 16 high-standard free trade agreements (FTA). With the FDI restrictiveness and trade facilitation indicators simulator being the 2nd in ASEAN, Vietnam is catching up with Singapore as the most open economy in the region and leaving its neighbors behind to some extent (OECD, 2019, 2023).

An interesting point in Vietnam's process of middle-power identity is its focus on convening and then, mediating power. A middle power may target a more ambitious leadership role by also convening like-minded members, effectively driving the development of international norms, and constructing security and economic architecture in tandem with great powers. To Vietnam, the 2nd US-DPRK Summit in 2019 is the pivotal juncture to construct the convening and mediating identity of a middle power. While assuming the role of a host, Vietnam could learn to sophisticatedly and rationally engage in later processes including mediation (Le & Vu, 2021). Vietnam expressed its willingness to be a mediator between the two countries but the feasibility of an agreement should be depended on the relevant parties. Besides, it should be noted that mediation itself also has a wide range of approaches, from the lowest level of good offices to actively inducing a certain solution to disputes (Zartman & Touval, 1985). Hanoi's endeavor to gradually undertake this role should be recorded.

As an advocate for the rules-based international order, Vietnam has persisted that international law is a framework for resolving international conflicts and maintaining peace and stability for the region and the world. This is betokened in the South China Sea case. Vietnam has always emphasized that the South China Sea issues can only be resolved under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), and the aim to achieve a Code of Conduct for the Parties in the South China Sea (COC). Vietnam is the only sub-regional signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (UN Watercourses Convention) (To & Vu, 2020). Besides, Vietnam is also expected to lead a code of conduct on the utilization and protection of the Mekong River due to its quite comprehensive network diplomacy with neighbors and middle-to-great powers.

As a balancer, Vietnam has not leaned towards any fraction to counter-balance the other. That motto has been claimed in Hanoi's 4-No Policy (Ministry of National Defense, 2019). Notably, with rational thinking epitomized through the dialectical dissection of 'partner of cooperation' and 'object of struggle', 'cooperation' and 'struggle' (CPV, 2003), Vietnam's decision-makers have made efforts to address the sensitive link between its self-reliance, self-independence, and the goal of building meaningful, long-lasting friendship and partnership in the backdrop of growing great powers rivalry (Le & Vu, 2020).

Vietnam's Identity Dilemma Between Self-Assertiveness and Skepticism?

Despite its implementation of the middle-power diplomacy, Hanoi's self-identity as a middle power seems to be inconsistent. There is a dilemma between self-confidence as an emerging power in Global South and skepticism about self-claiming the new status.

From the subjectivity, Vietnam has been emerging with a new stature for more than 30 years of Doi Moi (renovation). In terms of aggregate national strength, to make a rough estimate, Vietnam is positioned in the middle of the global power spectrum amongst 200 and more countries and territories. That means physical attributes allow Vietnam to self-construct its corporate and type-identity as a medium-sized state. However, some indicators such as income per capita are not convincing enough to keep up with its so-called peers, although that is explainable for the category of emerging middle powers (including South Africa, Indonesia, etc.). As Vietnam's main indicators range from lower-middle to upper-middle group, which may be asymptotic to the small-sized state group (Le & Vu, 2021), the country may find it indistinct to define itself as a middle power. On the one hand, the rising power has created favorable conditions for Vietnam to self-ascribe as a middle power. From a developing country, Vietnamese leaders aspire to realize the dream of 'becoming a developed nation with a high-income status by 2045' (CPV, 2021). On

the other hand, the incompleteness of middling strength and the vagueness of this terminology from the positional approach do not really encourage Vietnam to re-position itself. The strategic ambiguity, sometimes, may create a strategic setback. Furthermore, some eco-socio benefits for a developing and small-sized country seem to remain too attractive for Vietnam to give up. Approaching domestic politics, the notion of middle power is currently upheld by the academia, not the masses who have long been affected by the dichotomy of international politics.

In terms of inter-subjectivity, historical interactions play a crucial role in understanding the reason that Vietnam is skeptical to self-brand its middlepowermanship. In the Third Indochina War, Vietnam was once believed to have hegemonic ambitions, in both benevolent and coercive forms of control over Indochina (including Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam), especially through its interference on Cambodian territory (Emmers, 2005a, p. 648). Hitherto, the rhetoric about Cambodia and Laos under Vietnam's orbit (Grossman, 2020) makes Vietnamese strategists reluctant to re-identify the country with the higher status and role. Constrained by its historical experiences that once considered as a regional hegemony, Vietnamese leaders have not officially identified the country as a middle power (Le & Vu, 2020).

However, history also makes the paradox that it is also the source of Vietnam's self-assertiveness. Vietnam's pre-modern worldview, which was shaped by its resistance to the North and expansion to the South, resulted in a double identity in foreign affairs, namely counter-hegemony towards China and hegemony towards Laos, Cambodia, and other neighboring countries (Elliott, 1999; Nguyen, 2016; Wah, 2000). In the classic masterpiece 'Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu', Nguyen Trai, a Vietnamese national hero in the 15th century claimed the equality of Đại Việt [the ancient Vietnamese kingdom] with China during the long history (Womack, 2006, p. 130). It should be noted that the sense of self is prominent in the mindset of Vietnamese great minds, especially from the comparative perspectives with its huge neighbor. President Ho Chi Minh's expectation for the young generation is to make the country well-matched with the world's great powers. Vietnam's quest for a higher status and role is self-evident in its history.

In addition, Hanoi's integration into the region and the globe has created favorable conditions for Vietnam's reconstruction of state identity. The collective identity stemmed from the ASEAN is a source of Vietnam's new emerging identity as a middle power. It helps Hanoi transform its images from 'a war' to 'a country' (Le & Vu, 2020), from 'the main revolutionary force of Indochina' (Dobkowska, 2015) to 'an ASEAN member', and hitherto, 'the sectoral leader in ASEAN' (Emmers & Le, 2020), from 'a pariah' to 'a rising middle power while preserving one-party rule' (Nguyen & Vu, 2019). In the United Nations, from the ex-enemy of four out of five permanent members of the Security Council, Vietnam succeeded in establishing its role identity as a friend and partner with all of the world's major powers.

Despite its hesitation to self-conceptualize as a middle power by official rhetoric, the domestic academic community has been witnessing rising attention to the new concept. The years 2017 and 2018 mark the first time Vietnamese academia self-questioned whether it is time to re-position Vietnam as a middle power (D. T. Le, 2017, 2018; H. H. Le, 2018). From here, this concept has occurred in internal academic and policy circles, including the Ministerial-level research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Do, 2021; Le & Vu, 2020; Nguyen & Vu, 2019; Vu & Do, 2019; Vu & Le, 2020). From here, policy and strategic documents tend to re-position Vietnam's status on the international stage. Orthodox state media channels such as the Vietnam News Agency and the Vietnam Television Agency began to publicize this concept on public media (Duy Trinh-Hong Quan, 2020; VTV, 2020). The local knowledge has gradually contributed to the literature on Vietnam's middlepowermanship but demonstrated its insufficiency. Almost all existing researches are written in the native language, with a few conducted in the international language (Huynh,

2021; Jha et al., 2020; D. T. Le, 2018, 2019; Le & Hoang, 2019; Phan, 2021). The language barrier has thwarted Vietnamese scholars from popularizing self-identity in both quantitative and qualitative aspects.[4] In addition, the mindset of Vietnam as a small power is long-lasting that should be abandoned if Vietnam aspires to assume a higher role. Several Vietnamese scholars persist that Vietnam has conducted small-power diplomacy under the pressure of great power politics (Tran et al., 2013; Vu & Heydarian, 2015). Two factions of self-perception create identity dilemmas within the inner cycle of the academic and policy-making community.

Other-Perception

As theory posits, other-perception is the reflection of the self-image. Hanoi's inconsistent self-identity has unintentionally created a vague perception, especially for the region. There is no consensus that Vietnam is a middle power or a small power. That means, two camps of perception co-exist.

On the one hand, various analysts in the region have identified the country as a middle power and shared positive views on its international trajectory. In the 2018 Regional Outlook Forum (ROF), the flagship event of ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (Singapore), Former Secretary-General of ASEAN Ong Keng Yong and Chinese Professor Jin Canrong noted that China's preferred approach to ASEAN is paying much more attention to the relationship with such a middle power like Vietnam rather than with the whole association (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018, p. 4). Ralf Emmers and Sarah Teo soon recognized Vietnam as an Asia-Pacific middle power in terms of diplomatic activism (Emmers & Teo, 2014).

On the other hand, the collective identity of ASEAN as a grouping of small-sized countries still remains although Vietnam and other members such as Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore prevail over the rest. ASEAN member states rarely recognize Vietnam as a middle power. Whereas, the way China sees Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations is still reflected in Yang Jiechi's statement in Hanoi in 2010: 'China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact' (Pomfret, 2010). Moreover, China's perception of regional middle powers is limited in that it acknowledges the strategic value of middle powers that are allied with the U.S. based not on its respect for their middle-power status, but on its perception of the regional middle powers as the U.S.'s junior partners (Lee et al., 2015, p. 16).

Why are East Asian Countries Slow to Recognize Vietnam as a Middle Power Despite its Qualifying Capability and Foreign Policy?

Hanoi's Vague Identity: Between Smallness and Middleness
The co-existence of two types of other-perception illustrates that Vietnam suffers from an identity dilemma. Strong signals are needed to show the world that Vietnam desires to be a genuine middle power and has the firm foundation to dream so. The activeness in conveying the self-identity helps avoid miscommunication. The self-identification as a middle power (in a positive meaning), in lieu of being perceived as a regional power or hegemon, maybe more strategically beneficial for Vietnam.

Regional Norms
To ASEAN, it, in general, is reluctant to accept sensitive terms such as 'hegemon', 'regional power/leader', or even 'middle power', which betoken the relational power upon the association despite their difference in nature. Indeed, middle powers are not necessarily regional powers and hegemons (Robertson, 2017; Yilmaz, 2017). ASEAN itself does not produce formal leadership or

any other rhetorical term to express the superiority of one over others. Indonesia – traditionally closest to such a position – has only been seen as a de facto leader by size rather than by authority or legitimacy (Emmers, 2014; Emmers & Le, 2020).

To China, its outlook on East Asia is illustrated in its great-power diplomacy. This type of diplomacy has two meanings: one is how to deal with other great powers, and the other concerns China's self-perception as a great power with superiority in the international system (大国定位) (Hu, 2016). China's perception of other states is influenced by the hierarchical relationship generated by the ideology of Confucianism (Kang, 2010). Even Russia, Japan, and South Korea were treated as weak powers compared to the Middle Kingdom.

Historical Legacy

One important reason that challenges Vietnam's recognized middlepowermanship is its historical legacy. For many Southeast Asians, the name 'Vietnam' once evoked the image of a regional hegemony-seeker as the feudal Vietnamese dynasties conquered its neighbors (Evans & Rowley, 1990). In addition, in the 20th century, the rise of Vietnam as a communist frontier in light of the ideological Cold War threatened its neighbors. Whereas, to China, Vietnam was a small-sized state under its tributary order in which Vietnam had to comply with orders and acknowledge its superiority and precedence (Fairbank & Têng, 1941; Kang, 2020).

In history, almost all mainland ASEAN countries had conflicts with Vietnam, resulting in their skepticism of Vietnam's rising stature and political ambition. Thailand saw the Vietnamese presence as an immediate dangerous threat (Hoang, 1993). The country also 'viewed Vietnam, not China, as its traditional rival for influence on the Indochinese peninsula' (Zagoria, 1997, p. 157). Since the 18th century, the Vietnamese and the Thai have competed for influence, especially in Cambodia (Duong, 1991, p. 26). During the Second Indochina War, troops from some ASEAN countries (the Philippines and Thailand) were serving in Vietnam (Hoang, 1993, p. 284). Despite the special friendship, Cambodian perception of Vietnam has long been affected by the historical interactions. Cambodia's King once expressed that the country was 'sandwiched' between two powerful neighbors (Thailand and Vietnam), and historically 'threatened on the north and west by Thai irredentism, and on the east by Vietnamese expansionism' (Leifer, 1967, p. 186). This perception of threat, dated from the Sihanouk era, shaped the strategic thinking of Cambodia's political elites afterward, thus nurturing their mutual suspicion of Vietnam as a long-term threat to national security (Frings, 1994, p. 1). Vietnam's interference on Cambodian soil, despite its justice, has resulted in anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Phnom Penh (Hutt, 2016), which is considered a defining element of Cambodian identity (Brown & Zasloff, 1998). To Laos, Vietnam has long assumed hegemony over the landlocked small-sized country (Dommen, 1979), despite the benign expression (Emmers, 2005a; Stuart-Fox, 2008).

The non-communist states long perceived Vietnam as a threat in the Cold War era, some were fearful that Vietnam's victory would make the 'domino theory' a reality (Hoang, 1993, p. 284). This skepticism was further fueled by the Cambodia problem, which once thwarted Hanoi from integrating into the international community. Southeast Asian neighbors contended that Vietnam is the 'root cause' of instability in the Southeast (Elliott, 1983, p. 294). The outside world ascribed Vietnam a 'Prussian of the Orient' (Elliott, 1983; The New York Times, 1984).

To Indonesia, hesitance has arisen because Jakarta is the de-facto leader of ASEAN and has long been viewed as an emerging middle power and regional power. Vietnam's rising stature might be seen as a competitor to the superiority of Indonesia in the region. The two countries' striving for proactivism in ASEAN and the increasing recognition of external powers for Vietnam's performance in recent times can lead them to competition. The fact that Jakarta's greater capability and long-established activism in the region make the country slow to recognize

the recently rising status and role of Vietnam. Similarly, Malaysia's attitude towards Vietnam has been shaped by the fact that the country is also considered a middle power (Nossal & Stubbs, 1997; Ping, 2005). This case is, furthermore, complicated as the two countries are the claimants of overlapping continental shelf areas in different parts of the South China Sea (Emmers, 2005b, p. 77). Vietnam and Malaysia also experienced historical conflicts in ancient times (Dar, 2019).

Singapore, a predominantly ethnic Chinese city-state, seems to remain skeptical about Vietnam's history. As Vietnam's actions to remove the Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s are still a source of division among ASEAN member states, Singapore was among those that saw Hanoi's actions as an act of foreign aggression (Sim & Lee, 2019).

In the case of the relationship with China, in theory, it is of significance for Vietnam to be recognized as a middle power by a great power. However, Hanoi finds it challenging to change the worldview of Beijing. As aforementioned, the history legacy matters much in this case. Vietnam was not submissive towards the Chinese suzerainty which was proved by its wars against the giant neighbor. In addition, in the past, China once threatened Vietnam to teach Hanoi a lesson due to the Vietnam-Soviet Union alliance and Vietnam's emerging as a hegemon in Indochina.[5] Beijing is considered to find it difficult to accept a more powerful next-door Vietnam.

Epilogue

Whether a middle-power Vietnam serves the interests of Hanoi itself and other countries is debatable. To Vietnam, a middle-power self-identity, on the one hand, is the premise for the world to name it and consequently, for itself to continue to see the world. Furthermore, it acts as a guide for foreign policy behaviors. On the other hand, any classification of countries as neither great, middle nor small is not formal in international practice. The ambiguous identity may convert to strategic ambiguity, serving national interests, such as continuing to receive assistance from the developed world and avoiding proking others in sensitive circumstances due to regional norms and historical interactions.

To its neighbors, the recognition of a more powerful Vietnam may vitalize the region and encourage the country to assume larger roles of a middle power, thus contributing much more to the betterment of the region. However, due to its complexity and sensitivity in history and political culture, those countries are hesitant to do so. They may be afraid of a small region having several emerging powers.

To perfect its other-perception, Vietnam has to persuade its regional peers its middle-power stature is positive for the sake of the region. A middle-power Vietnam would conduce to the public goods for Southeast Asia and even the Indo-Pacific as roles come with pertinent responsibilities.

Political leadership and its core institutions have only rarely described the country as a middle power, focusing instead on alternative forms of self-identification. Despite the absence of official recognition, the country's standing will be better improved if academic and policy circles promote their ability. Vietnam can gradually build a middle-power identity through research channels (track 2 diplomacy), thereby examining international responses for appropriate policy adjustments.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. (Easley, 2012; Emmers & Le, 2020; Emmers & Teo, 2014; Haass, 2019; Kim, 2021; Kratiuk, 2014; Le, 2019; Le & Vu, 2020, 2021; Park et al., 2013)
2. The author's interviews.
3. The author's interviews.
4. A research paper of a Vietnamese scholar on Vietnam's middle-power status was translated from Vietnamese into Chinese by a Chinese scholar. Read more, (Li & Zuo, 2019).
5. (Chanda, 1986)

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