

Master's Thesis in International Relations

India's Foreign Policy toward Vietnam, 2014 - 2024

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Abstract

This study is about India's contemporary foreign policy toward Vietnam, 2014-2024. The bilateral relationship between the two Asian states is important for the understanding of an important feature of India's contemporary foreign policy – strategic partnerships. India has developed strategic bilateral relations with the Southeast Asian state, where India engages Vietnam bilaterally, through ASEAN and via Indo Pacific initiatives.

The research question asks the following: Why does Indian foreign policy under the Narendra Modi government emphasise Vietnam as a resource to utilise? In an attempt to answer this question, this study hypothesises two causal factors which can account for India's engagement with Vietnam. First, there is India's Act East Policy, which is a restructured version of its former Look East Policy, and second, India might utilise Vietnam as a resource because India feels under pressure from China, and therefore looks for support.

India's foreign policy toward Vietnam has been examined as a single case study using qualitative methods. For the analysis, this study employs a neoclassical realist theoretical and analytical framework, where the dependent variable is India's foreign policy, while the independent variable is India's relative power.

The source material comes from official sources such as the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Indian Navy, as well as from academic journals and books.

The argument of this thesis is that India's Act East Policy (AEP) has played an important role in India's foreign policy toward Vietnam. In a similar vein, China has also played a role in the India-Vietnam relationship, while both causal factors at times overlap due to the presence of China in India's AEP.

The research design is characterised by a single case study, which primarily examines India's foreign policy at the level of structure and the state. While this study acknowledges that sub-state factors, e.g. elite consensus, are important, these factors remain underexplored in this study.

This study shows that India's Act East Policy has indeed had a causal impact on India's engagement with Vietnam, while also China has a causal impact on the India-Vietnam relationship due a common stance against China regarding border disputes in the South China Sea (Vietnam/China), while India has its own disputes with China along the border region. While both India and Vietnam are concerned about a rising China due to its large economy and strong military, also China has its own strategic security concerns over balancing behaviour from other states.

The key findings also demonstrate that India's engagement with Vietnam has increased significantly following an increase in India's relative power, while elite consensus exists in relation to India's Vietnam and China policies.

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List of Abbreviations

AEP	Action East Policy
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Intergovernmental organisation with member states from Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Ethiopia, Egypt, the UAE, and Iran
CSP	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
IPOI	Indo Pacific Oceans Initiative
IR	International Relations
LEP	Look East Policy
NCR	Neoclassical Realism
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SCS	South China Sea

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Setting the Scene: India's Relationship with Vietnam

In recent years, India's relationship with Vietnam has gained attention from foreign policy analysts in academia. As noted by Marwa & Nga, India's relationship with Vietnam has become comprehensive and begun to cover a variety of areas, such as security, defense, technology, the economic sphere, and culture.¹

According to Amitendu Palit, Prime Minister Modi introduced India's Act East Policy in late 2014, which is a modified version of India's Look East Policy. As a restructured policy, the Act East Policy (AEP) is more action-oriented due to India's ambition of becoming more proactive vis-à-vis the countries to the East. In contrast with its predecessor, the Look East Policy (LEP), the AEP has a wider strategic depth and geographic scope. This is in consistence with the Modi government's foreign policy vision, where India should play a larger role both regionally and globally. Finally, Palit sees the AEP as a strategy which seeks to adjust to the changing security and economic dynamics of Southeast Asia.²

Empirically, the importance of India's bilateral relations with Vietnam can be confirmed in a variety of ways, for instance by pointing to the Indian warships' call at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam in 2016. The warships formed part of the Eastern Fleet deployment to the South China Sea and elsewhere in the Pacific, with the main aim of security enhancement.³

For Marwah & Nga, high level visits between India and Vietnam following the introduction of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in 2016 reflect political trust and the importance of the other country to each state. One example of this was the virtually held

¹ Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga, *India-Vietnam Relations: Development Dynamic and Strategic Alignment* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 14.

² Amitendu Palit. "INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA." *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2016): 81-91, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/indias-act-east-policy-implications-southeast/docview/1787063074/se-2>

³ Indian Navy, "Visit of Indian Warships to Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam," accessed May 10, 2024, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/visit-indian-warships-cam-ranh-bay-vietnam-0>

summit between Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc in December 2020 titled “Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity and People”.⁴

An announcement made by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) refers to the summit, and lists outcomes such as security-related agreements, e.g. an agreement on a high speed boat project that is to be manufactured for the Vietnamese border guard, and 100 million dollars worth of defense line credit from India.⁵

In a similar vein, Marwah & Nga notes that Vietnam’s diversified and multilateral foreign policy orientation has allowed India to become an important aspect of Vietnam’s foreign policy orientation. The two authors point to the high level exchanges between the two states, and argue that this indicates India’s ascending position for Vietnam between 2010 and 2020. Vietnam has strengthened its defense cooperation with India as India has helped to train Vietnamese air force pilots.⁶

The Puzzle and Research Question

Under closer inspection, India’s relationship with Vietnam seems to remain modest in many areas. Pulipaka & Garg point out that in respect of the regional economic architecture; India and Vietnam are yet to strengthen common areas. This is in part due to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), of which Vietnam is a member, but India is not. The RCEP makes it easier for companies to enter the Vietnamese market, while the tariff structure makes it possible to export back to RCEP member states with minimal costs.⁷

Trade data between India and Vietnam also seem to confirm the above observations. From April 2022 to March 2023, the bilateral trade reached 14.7 billion US dollars, of which Indian

⁴ Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga, “Histories, Affinities, and Leaders: Vietnam–India Political and Diplomatic Ties,” in *India–Vietnam Relations: Development Dynamics and Strategic Alignment* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 1-24, https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1007/978-981-16-7822-6_1

⁵ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, “List of Outcomes: India-Vietnam Virtual Summit (December 21, 2020),” December 21, 2020, accessed May 7, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33325/list+of+outcomes+india++vietnam+virtual+summit+december+21+2020>

⁶ Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga, “Foreign Policies of Vietnam and India: Articulating Convergences,” in *India–Vietnam Relations: Development Dynamics and Strategic Alignment* (Singapore: Springer. 2021), 45-68, https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1007/978-981-16-7822-6_3

⁷ Sanjay Pulipaka and Libni Garg, “India and Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific,” *India Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2021): 143-158, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211004984>

exports to Vietnam accounted for around 5.9 billion US dollars, while Indian imports were close to 8.8 billion US dollars.⁸

Since these data from the bilateral trade are modest, it shows that the India-Vietnam relationship is not based on strong economic relations.

On the other hand, David Scott argues that India's bilateral relations with some ASEAN states such as Vietnam and Singapore are more important than with others, not least from a strategic and defense point of view. This, Scott observes, is in consistence with Indian objectives, and he points to India's extended neighbourhood framework to support his claims, which concerns the regions beyond South Asia. Southeast Asia is one such example, and there four important areas of cooperation which underpins the extended neighbourhood policy relate to the military, security, trade and energy.⁹

This suggests that while trade might be an aspect of the India-ASEAN relationship, it is not the only one, and in the case of India's relationship with Vietnam, it is not the main foundation. One might therefore enquire why India has enlisted Vietnam as an important resource to help meet its foreign policy objectives.

India's objective to engage Vietnam seems puzzling because the Southeast Asian state has traditionally been allocated to the periphery in India's foreign policy calculus. Yet, as demonstrated above, in recent years India has strengthened its relationship with Vietnam in areas such as security. The research question asks:

Why does India's foreign policy under the Narendra Modi government emphasise Vietnam as a resource to utilise?

To answer this question, the neoclassical realist framework has been employed to serve as the theoretical base to understand which factors best explain what drives India's foreign policy to engage Vietnam. As Norrin M. Ripsman suggests, neoclassical realism is primarily a causes-

⁸ Embassy of India in Hanoi, Vietnam, "Bilateral Relations; India-Vietnam relations, accessed April 2, 2024, <https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/bilateral-relations2/>

⁹ David Scott, "India's "Extended Neighborhood" Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power," *India Review* 8, no.2 (2009): 107-143, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/14736480902901038>

of-effects approach,¹⁰ and this makes it specifically suited for this study. In an attempt to answer the research question, this study proposes the following two hypotheses:

H1: India emphasises Vietnam as a resource to utilise because Vietnam has gained a renewed focus in India's foreign policy due to India's Act East Policy.

H2: India emphasises Vietnam as a resource to utilise because India feels under pressure from China and therefore looks for support.

The deductive nature of this study means that an attempt will be made to either confirm or reject the hypotheses.

1.3 Objective of this Study

The aim is to understand India's rationale for seeking to enhance its relationship with Vietnam. In doing so, it is important to; first, examine India's overall foreign policy orientation during the time period. Second, to empirically verify that India has strengthened its engagement with Vietnam, and finally to test neoclassical realism against the case, which seeks to see understand if the hypotheses can offer satisfactorily explanations to the research question.

1.4 The Argument

This study argues that India's foreign policy toward Vietnam under Narendra Modi is primarily driven by two factors; India's expanding role in Southeast Asia following the implementation of its Act East Policy, and second that China as a third party, influences India's behaviour toward Vietnam, because India sees China along the spectrum from competitor to security threat. In essence, the India-Vietnam relationship is currently a strategic relationship primarily based on political and security interests.

¹⁰ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "A Methodology of Neoclassical Realism," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 99-138, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0006>

1.5 Why is this Study Important?

This study is important to gain an understanding of India's strategic relationship with Vietnam.

India's growing influence in international politics is underpinned by its economic growth, and therefore India is likely to seek to gain a larger share of the global power. According to a recent World Bank estimate, India is among the world's fastest growing economies, and this growth is likely to continue.¹¹ Specifically, the World Bank estimates that India's annual growth for 2022 in terms of GDP was 7.2%. Vietnam has also witnessed strong annual economic growth during 2022, which stood at 8% in terms of GDP.¹²

These data strengthen the idea that India is increasingly becoming a major actor, and therefore important to study. Since the study of India's relationship with Vietnam concerns China, it becomes an important research problem. This is because China is important to many theoretical IR debates, where G.V.C Naidu for instance, points out that China has become a new power centre, while the US as the predominant power is in decline. Such shifts in power can lead to various outcomes, such as regional multilateralism.¹³

The contribution of this study thus lies in applying neoclassical realism to the recent and unfolding India-Vietnam relations.

1.6 Literature Review

The relevant literature in regard to India's foreign policy toward Vietnam can be organised in the following way; the recent debates on India's foreign policy toward Vietnam are often viewed through the prism of a rising India, or make references to the perceived threat from China. Still, there are also a few studies which approach the India-Vietnam relationship from the perspective of the latter.

In Don McLain Gill's neoclassical realist study of the India-Vietnam relationship, Gill approaches the relationship from a Vietnamese perspective. In accordance with NCR, Gill

¹¹ World Bank, "At a Glance," accessed May 16, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/india/overview>

¹² World Bank, "GDP growth (annual %) – Viet Nam," <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=VN>

¹³ G. V. C. Naidu, "India–Vietnam Strategic Partnership in the Emerging Indo-Pacific Construct," *India Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2021): 172-184, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211005010>

accepts the importance of the structural distribution of material power as an important factor in Vietnam's foreign policy calculus in regard to India. Still, he does not see structural geopolitical explanations sufficient in themselves in explaining Vietnam's relationship with India, because if it were only for material gains, Vietnam could also have deepened security ties with another state other than India, at a similar pace.¹⁴

Furthermore, Gill argues that India is an ideal partner for Vietnam for two reasons; First, Vietnam seeks to check an assertive China when necessary, but at the same time, Vietnam does not want to balance against China like the US bloc does.¹⁵

Arshid Iqbal Dar seems to be in agreement with Gill when it comes to Vietnam's caution about not balancing against China in a traditional manner. He has analysed the India-Vietnam relationship from the perspective of hedging in regard to China, where he understands hedging as a strategy that is located between balancing and bandwagoning. Such a strategy is pragmatic in nature, and states employ it to manage their relations with a nearby rising power, which is perceived as threatening. India and Vietnam have both enacted counteracting policy measures in regard to China, including bilateral economic cooperation as well as made assurances to China, of not engaging in an anti-China bloc. Dar thus argues that hedging as a middle position best describes the foreign policy response of either India or Vietnam (or collectively) toward an assertive China. At the same time, Dar suggests that this is a logical step as India and Vietnam at the same time can draw advantage of China's economy.¹⁶

To further demonstrate consistency between Dar and Gill, one might point to Gill who argues that an important aspect of India's bilateral relations with Vietnam lies in the fact that India favours strategic autonomy regarding the great powers. While both India and Vietnam perceive China as a threat, then from a Vietnamese perspective, it is less controversial to foster security relations with India, than it is to become part of an American alliance system. Gill thus predicts that provided India continues to increase its material capabilities while

¹⁴ Don McLain Gill, "Locating the Evolving Vietnam-India Security Partnership in Hanoi's Hedging Strategy with Major Powers: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis," *Millennial Asia* (Nov, 2023): <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09763996231211510>

¹⁵ Don McLain Gill, "Locating the Evolving Vietnam-India Security Partnership in Hanoi's Hedging Strategy with Major Powers: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis," *Millennial Asia* (Nov, 2023): <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09763996231211510>

¹⁶ Arshid Iqbal Dar, "India-Vietnam Axis and China: The Allure of Hedging," *India Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2021): 252-268, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211005011>

being consistent in its strategic relations with Vietnam, their bilateral relations are likely to grow.¹⁷

Until now, the literature review has focused on the strategic aspects of the bilateral relations, which is also in alignment with the research problem. Indeed, as far as security is concerned, there seems to be scholarly consensus that this is an important aspect of the relations. For G.V.C Naidu, this assumption also holds true as he argues that India's relationship with Vietnam has not fulfilled its potentials. This is because it focuses on defense and security, whereas the economic ties are not robust. Still, Naidu acknowledges India's close ties with Vietnam, which entails strong political relations, but it is not underpinned by the required institutional mechanisms to enhance the ties. The reason for the failure in relation to economic ties is due to India's marginal role played in East Asia, while Vietnam primarily focuses on its own region of Southeast Asia. In this sense, the major powers who participate more in the regional economic activities than India does, thus obtain more leverage with Vietnam in terms of geopolitical heft. Still, India maintains a clear presence in the security field, and Naidu suggests that the Indo Pacific construct offers good opportunities for further enhancing India-Vietnam relations.¹⁸

In summary, the literature review has guided this thesis in the direction of exploring India's Vietnam policy through the prism of security, which in return delineates the study.

1.8 Thesis Overview

The introductory chapter has provided an overview of the research problem and stated the aim of this study. It is also in this chapter that the literature review is to be found. Chapter Two is the methodological chapter, which discusses the choice of theory and sources, while clarifying the research design.

Chapter Three discusses the selected theory. It begins with a theoretical discussion of neoclassical realism to present the central concepts and rationale of this strand of realism.

¹⁷ Don McLain Gill, "Locating the Evolving Vietnam–India Security Partnership in Hanoi's Hedging Strategy with Major Powers: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis," *Millennial Asia* (Nov, 2023): <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09763996231211510>

¹⁸ G. V. C. Naidu, "India–Vietnam Strategic Partnership in the Emerging Indo-Pacific Construct," *India Quarterly* 77, no.2, (2021): 172-184, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211005010>

The other central element to this chapter is the discussion of how neoclassical realism is applied to the study of India's relationship with Vietnam as an analytical framework.

Chapter Four is the analytical chapter, which examines the case study using the selected theoretical and analytical framework outlined in the previous chapter, to test the hypotheses. The chapter begins with an outline of India's interests and strategy. The structure of the empirical analysis follows a pattern which reflects the two hypotheses. Therefore, the role of the Act East Policy and the role of China in the India-Vietnam relationship will be examined under such sub-headings, first separately, followed by a concluding discussion of each hypothesis's importance and relation with the other.

Finally, Chapter Five is the concluding chapter, which provides a summary of key findings. Later, the chapter discusses the argument, research question, and the validity of the hypotheses in details, while also reflecting on choices made in regard to key features of this study, such as the choice of employing neoclassical realism.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the choice of research methods and the methodological underpinnings of this study. This section seeks to elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses associated with the selected research methods as well as to justify the choice of the selected research design.

The first hypothesis stated that: India emphasises Vietnam as a resource to utilise because Vietnam has gained a renewed focus in India's foreign policy due to India's Act East Policy.

The second hypothesis stated that: India emphasises Vietnam as a resource to utilise because India feels under pressure from China and therefore looks for support.

2.2 Choice of Theory

Of the different strands of realism, neoclassical realism has been selected to serve as a theoretical framework for this study, while it also serves as the analytical approach. The reason for choosing realism is due to the research problem and question, where security, national interests, and competition are important.

To understand why neorealism has been rejected, one might refer to Jeffrey W. Taliaferro who argues that Kenneth Walt's structural realism/neorealism treats the state like a black box by mostly focusing on the constraints from the international system.¹⁹ In this sense, it will be challenging to appreciate certain strategies employed by Narendra Modi government in relation to Vietnam if the focus is almost entirely at the international level.

Another variant is offensive realism as articulated by John J. Mearsheimer. He argues that in a world where each state needs to be able to help itself, it is important to become as powerful as possible in order to enhance chances for survival.²⁰ Since India is not aggressively

¹⁹ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Neoclassical realism and resource extraction: State building for future war," in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, ed. Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 207.

²⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 216.

pursuing power at the expense of others for its survival, this strand of realism cannot satisfactorily be applied to India's foreign policy toward Vietnam.

To understand why neoclassical realism is better able to explain the hypotheses than structural realism, one might point to Norrin M. Ripsman et al. who observe that NCR can provide insights on foreign policy responses as a dependent variable.²¹ This is crucial this thesis seeks to explain Indian foreign policy, and in this sense, purely structural variants of realism seem less relevant, and one might point to Ripsman et al. who argue that for structural realists, the premise is that foreign policy is externally driven.²²

2.3 Choice of Data

This study employs both qualitative and quantitative data to gain a better understanding of India's relationship with Vietnam. If one was to employ primarily statistical data, it would be challenging to carry out a study which seeks to understand the nature of their bilateral relationship. True, limitations to qualitative data exist, not least because these data tend to be less scientific than those of quantitative data. The aim however, is to carry out a NCR study based on qualitative research methods, and when deemed relevant; quantitative data will be provided as supportive evidence.

This decision might be justified by referring to Norrin M. Ripsman et al., who point out that since neoclassical realism is concerned with policy choices; it leans toward qualitative case studies as opposed to large-N quantitative studies. This is not least due to the latter's inability to determine whether the hypothesised independent variable has a causal impact on a state's policy choices.²³

Where no prior knowledge of the sources existed, the sources were located through database keyword searches or reference tracing.

²¹ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9

²² Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "Neoclassical Realist Theory and the Limits of Structural Realism," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16-32, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0002>

²³ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "A Methodology of Neoclassical Realism," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 99-138, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0006>

Qualitative Data

This study covers India's contemporary foreign policy, which is reflected in the absence of historical archival sources. Furthermore, many foreign policy documents are classified. This study thus relies on the following types of source material to support the analysis; academic journals and books as well as Indian government and navy material, such as statements and speeches.

It is important to consult government sources in order to better understand India's position and rationale for conducting its foreign policy

The main disadvantage of using information made available by governments is their preferences for placing their own countries in favourable light. This dilemma however, can somewhat be overcome by examining the government material in their right context, and with the help of academic literature. In this way, one is better able to understand the motives behind statements and thereby be able to assess their reliability.

In his research of alliances, Stephen M. Walt mostly relies on secondary sources, and emphasises that his analysis is dependent on the expertise of area specialists.²⁴ This is significant, because a certain amount of the secondary source material used in this study is written by area experts.

Still, the use of secondary sources might also pose a problem. According to Norrin M. Ripsman et al., secondary sources often disagree, which make it challenging to avoid bias when deciding on which empirical accounts to choose from.²⁵

Quantitative Data

The quantitative data used in this study are primarily statistics used to provide background information, or to emphasise certain points. These data might for example include population statistics from the World Bank or information on military expenditures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

²⁴ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 15.

²⁵ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 133.

2.4 Single Case Study

A single case study seems appropriate when attempting to understand the research problem. The rationale for rejecting a comparative case study is as follows; while a comparative case study of India's foreign policy, e.g. toward Vietnam and Japan, is theoretically relevant in relation to the role of structural factors, such as the rise of China, then this would mean that India's Vietnam policy would be examined in less detail.

With a single case study come certain limitations. As Stephen M. Walt points out, a single case study has its limitations when several hypotheses are tested against the case, On the other hand, Walt sees comparative case studies as more promising, although he recognises that a number of cases is a prerequisite for valid conclusions to be established. Yet Walt seems to favour the case study method over quantitative methods, because he emphasises the shortcomings of statistical manipulations as a method since it is not able to consider a case's new contextual features.²⁶ In this sense, a single case is able to consider changes which occur during research, and is thus capable of taking into consideration such features.

Still there is one negative tendency among single case studies, including this one, to which there is no remedy against, and that is that the findings are not generalisable. This is because as a single case study, India's relationship with Vietnam has some unique features. For a thorough explanation, it could be relevant to refer to Gustavo Alejandro Mendiola's neoclassical realist study of another Southeast Asian state, where he suggests that a trade-off might arise when choosing neoclassical realism as it is often not possible to have generalisable cases. As opposed to neorealism, a neoclassical realist study, he argues, can analyse deviations from a neorealist study of state behaviour. In Mendiola's study of Thailand, his incorporation of state and sub state-analyses are unique to that state, which is why he suggests that the factors do not produce similar outcomes in other cases.²⁷

Measurements

To examine the developments in the India-Vietnam relationship, it is important to have some form of measurement to demonstrate that India is engaging Vietnam considerably. Although

²⁶ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 11.

²⁷ Gustavo Alejandro Mendiola, "Strategic Hedging and Middle Power Foreign Policy: The Case of Thailand as Viewed Through Neoclassical Realism" (PhD thesis, Curtin University, 2023), 34-35, <https://espace.curtin.edu.au/handle/20.500.11937/93845>

the research question asks why India engages Vietnam, the question implies that India does so to some extent, and it is therefore important to provide evidence for this.

As previously hinted, the scope of this study is limited to primarily India's strategic relations with Vietnam from a political and security perspective.

This study draws inspiration from Ma & Kang's analysis of Vietnam's strategic preferences where the two authors examine high-level political exchanges to determine how Vietnam has prioritised its foreign relations. Their definition of a "high-level exchange" is of a meeting held at the ministerial level or above. Such an official exchange is used to measure how important a state views its relations with another state.²⁸ While there will be no counts of high-level exchanges between India and Vietnam, this form of measurement will be used to underline the importance of India's engagement with Vietnam.

2.5 A Positivist Worldview

According to Meibauer, a neoclassical realist study is loosely positivist.²⁹ This is not a flaw per se, because as Norrin M. Ripsman et al. point out, hard positivism is problematic when studying human behaviour. For instance, a scientist might easily be able to measure the temperature of metal using standard methods, while a social scientist might have little choice but to rely on subjective reports. Furthermore, neoclassical realists rely on certain aspects of positivism, and thus view theory testing as important. Indeed, neoclassical realists accept the premise there is an objective world out there, and that case studies are an important method to gain knowledge of that world.³⁰

²⁸ Xinru Ma and David C. Kang. "Why Vietnam Is Not Balancing China: Vietnamese Security Priorities and the Dynamics in Sino-Vietnam Relations," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 23, no. 3 (2023): 363–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2023.16>

²⁹ Gustav Meibauer, "Neorealism, neoclassical realism and the problem(s) of history," *International Relations* 37, no.2 (2023): 348-369, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178211033943>

³⁰ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "A Methodology of Neoclassical Realism," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 99-138, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0006>

2.6 Note on the use of Geographic Terms

For the purpose of this study, South Asia is defined according to the CIA World Factbook, which comprises the countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.³¹

The classification used for Southeast Asia corresponds with the definition used by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Southeast Asia therefore, comprises Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam on the mainland, and the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei.³²

2.7 Scope of this Study and Delimitation

This is an International Relations study. Still, as previously hinted, this study will from time to time draw on insights from area studies experts.

As far as geography is concerned, China, and to a lesser extent India, are able to project their power beyond their own regions. This makes it challenging to limit the study to a particular region, which is why the adjacent regions of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia will be relevant in the discussion of bilateral relations between India and Vietnam.

It is important to emphasise that the focus on India's relations with Vietnam is from an Indian perspective. Still, for a more nuanced understanding of events, the perspectives of other states will at times be included. With this in mind, India's relations with states other than Vietnam will be discussed when deemed relevant to India's Vietnam policy, where one such example concerns the overall India-ASEAN relations.

Time Frame

When attempting to understand why India engages Vietnam, it is necessary to do so with a time frame in mind. The time frame for the case study spans from 2014-2024, thus covering the entire duration of Narendra Modi's premiership till date. The year 2014 is a relevant year to begin the case because it was the year in which Narendra Modi was elected for his first

³¹ CIA World Factbook, "The World Factbook South Asia", accessed May 11, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/south-asia/>

³² ASEAN, "ASEAN Member States," accessed May 11, 2024, <https://asean.org/member-states/>

term in office, while 2024 is a logical place to end the case, because it coincides with the end to the prime minister's second term in office.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Approach

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a theoretical discussion of neoclassical realism by explaining its key concepts, the different NCR variants, and the level of analysis. Next, the application of this strand of realism will be discussed in regard to the India-Vietnam relationship. This is followed by a brief explanation of the importance of foreign policy executives to neoclassical realism.

3.2 Neoclassical Realism as an IR Theory

According to Gideon Rose, neoclassical realism falls under the realist umbrella, and postulates that a state's foreign policy is mostly determined by the state's place in the international system, measured by the relative material power it holds. The systemic pressures however, are translated by states through unit-level intervening variables. The transmission belt which links material capabilities to a state's foreign policy outcomes is not always simple for leaders to assess, and therefore, apart from real capabilities, the perception of relative power is also important. Indeed, neoclassical realists also examine as to what degree leaders are able to extract the required resources for their foreign policy aims.³³

For Gideon Rose, neoclassical realists see a correlation between increased relative material power of a state and an ambitious foreign policy, although such a process is not only based on objective materialism, but also of leaders' subjective understanding. Neoclassical realism therefore is open to the use of cultural and ideational factors when examining leaders' perceptions of capabilities, and the process in which perceptions affect foreign policy decision making. To put this in the context of methodology, theoretically informed narratives can explain the link between relative material power and decision making.³⁴

³³ Gideon Rose, "Review of *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, by Michael E. Brown, Thomas J. Christensen, Randall L. Schweller, William Curti Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054068>

³⁴ Gideon Rose, "Review of *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, by Michael E. Brown, Thomas J. Christensen, Randall L. Schweller, William Curti Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054068>

Ripsman et al. suggest that NCR posits itself between materialist and ideational theories, with the former largely ignoring ideology, the latter emphasises ideology and largely ignores states' material interests. When states are constrained by their strategic environments, the authors assert, structural variables tend to override ideational ones, when determining states' foreign policies.³⁵

Neoclassical Realism's Three Variants

Norrin M. Ripsman et al. argue that type I NCR finds structural realism's explanation of foreign policy in an anarchic international system sufficient. Therefore, Type 1 neoclassical realists like their structural realist counterparts, view balancing as almost mechanic and fluid, where states only fail to provide rational security responses in certain cases due to misperception, or other factors located at the domestic level. The main goal of type I NCR is to explain deviant cases which structural realism cannot account for.³⁶

Another variant of NCR is the type II variant, which Norrin M. Ripsman et al., describe as a theory of foreign policy. This variant aims to provide more than merely an explanation for the anomalies which structural realists cannot account for.³⁷

According to Ripsman et al, the Type III neoclassical realism is broader in scope than the previous types. The third variant seeks to explain international politics, for example by seeking to explain international outcomes produced by the interaction of states' chosen policy choices.³⁸

³⁵ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "Resolving Key Theoretical Debates Using Neoclassical Realism," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0007>

³⁶ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "Neoclassical Realist Theory and the Limits of Structural Realism," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16-32, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0002>

³⁷ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "Neoclassical Realist Theory and the Limits of Structural Realism," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16-32, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0002>

³⁸ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "The Scope and Domain of Neoclassical Realism: The Dependent Variables," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 80-98, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0005>

This study most resembles the Type II NCR, because it is not as broad in scope as the type III variant, nor as structurally focused as the first variant.

Level of Analysis

Fareed Zakaria criticises foreign policy theories that adhere to a low level of analysis by focusing only on a state's internal factors. Therefore, Zakaria postulates that it is important to begin the analysis with an assessment of the systemic effects on states' foreign policy, because states' relative standing in the system are crucial for their international relations.³⁹

Tang Shiping notes a major difference between the various strands of realism lies in the level of their analysis regarding the priority given to the systemic, state and individual level of analysis varies in their explanations of state behaviour and international outcomes. While an older variant of realism known as classical realism mostly relies on variables at the individual level, structural realists rely on a structural level-analysis, while neoclassical realism combine structural and state levels into their analysis, while occasionally analysing factors at the individual level.⁴⁰

According to Randal Schweller, neoclassical realism can explain foreign policy decisions by using first, second, and third image variables. In Schweller's view, using third image ones alone might not be sufficient to explain many puzzles, for instance in a case where a powerful state's regional rivals do not opt for an arms race against the state. Therefore, it is important to locate unit-level causes to explain certain behaviours.⁴¹

Ripsman et al. see consensus among structural realists over the premise that the global power distribution over time is caused by states' uneven growth. This can help explain India's optimistic foreign policy orientation, although India is yet to change the global power distribution significantly. The reason behind states' uneven growth can be found at the domestic level, because each state's political and economic decisions are contributing factors.

³⁹ Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 16.

⁴⁰ Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy For Our Time: Defensive Realism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 13.

⁴¹ Randall Schweller, "Opposite but Compatible Nationalisms: A Neoclassical Realist Approach to the Future of US-China Relations," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (2018): 23–48, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/cjip/poy003>

Over a short to medium period of time however, states' grand strategies and foreign policy options are constrained by the international system.⁴²

Finally, in neoclassical realism, Norrin M. Ripsman et al. note, it is important to get inside a state's black box, because it is essential to understand why certain policies were selected.⁴³

State Power

According to Fareed Zakaria, state power is a superior over national power as an indicator to explain a state's foreign policy, because state power is the amount of national power which a government is able to extract to meet its foreign policy aims.⁴⁴

Randal Schweller seems to be in agreement with Zakaria over the importance of state power in international politics, as he argues that it is at the core of both state behaviour (e.g. striving for security or prestige) and a state's grand strategy.⁴⁵

Criticism of Realism

While the theoretical discussion on realism has demonstrated its advantages, realism has nevertheless been criticised for its limitations.

Prominent Asian International Relations scholar, Amitav Acharya points out that it is challenging to apply the major IR theories, such as realism to the international relations of Asian states. This is because mainstream IR theories supposedly apply to all regions, while in reality theories on a specific region evolve based on that region's own peculiarities in terms

⁴² Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 90.

⁴³ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "A Methodology of Neoclassical Realism," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 99-138, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0006>

⁴⁴ Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9.

⁴⁵ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 238.

of issues. Acharya also notes that much academic literature related to Asia is generated by area specialists who do not identify with the main IR paradigms such as realism.⁴⁶

However, Gideon Rose who was first to use the term *neoclassical realism* has emphasised the importance of drawing on area experts when analysing a state's foreign policy as opposed to only employing a universalist approach.⁴⁷

This shows that neoclassical realist scholars are aware of the important contributions made by area scholars, and that the raised criticism seems to be less directed at neoclassical realism, but perhaps more directed against neorealism. This study draws on area experts to form arguments, and neoclassical realism seems more sensitive to the peculiarities of Asian regional power politics than neorealism/ structural realism, due to the importance of unit-level factors. True, NCR was developed in the West; however it has applied to an Asian context, such as the above mentioned study by Don McLain Gill, who has examined India's relationship with Vietnam, and with the inclusion of domestic variables, Gill seems to suggest that neoclassical realism is more complete than structural realism.⁴⁸

Buzan & Wæver criticise structural realists for their strong focus on the global power distribution as an explanatory factor when explaining regional events. The two authors instead emphasise an assessment of the regional power structure as opposed to employing a top-down approach and abstract general theories that see regions as elements in a major strategic superpower setting.⁴⁹

While NCR is different from neorealism/structural realism, the above criticism could in part also apply to neoclassical realism. This is because NCR greatly draws on structural realism, and in the case of this study, it also employs a top-down approach as part of the neoclassical analytical framework due to the importance of structure, but with the use of state-level factors' role in India's foreign policy, and with the recognition of, albeit limited use of, below-state level factors.

⁴⁶ Amitav Acharya, "Thinking Theoretically about Asian IR," in *International Relations of Asia*, 3rd ed., ed. David Shambaugh (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 57-58.

⁴⁷ Gideon Rose, "Review of *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, by Michael E. Brown, Thomas J. Christensen, Randall L. Schweller, William Curti Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144-72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054068>

⁴⁸ Don McLain Gill, "Locating the Evolving Vietnam-India Security Partnership in Hanoi's Hedging Strategy with Major Powers: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis," *Millennial Asia* (Nov, 2023): , <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09763996231211510>

⁴⁹ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69.

Finally, neoclassical realist scholar, Shiping Tang, raises criticism against neoclassical realists who fail to include some form of measurements into their studies regarding the variables.⁵⁰ Indeed, this point is noted and attempts have been made to include measurements.

3.3 Theoretical Application of Neoclassical Realism

Variables and the Level of Analysis

As hinted, Gideon Rose argues that neoclassical realists make relative power their main independent variable.⁵¹ Following this, the independent variable in this study understands India's foreign policy as being mostly affected by its relative power, while the dependent variable is India's foreign policy. Therefore the study must examine the impact of India's relative power on its relationship with Vietnam by attempting to establish a link between its relative power and the Act East Policy, to see if the AEP is an expression of India's increase in its relative power, which has resulted in increasing cooperation with Vietnam. Indeed, India's relative power is also relevant in regard to hypothesis two, which sees China as being a factor in the India-Vietnam relationship, and therefore it is important to examine whether an increase in Indian power has led India to strengthen its security ties with Vietnam due to mistrust of a third state, China.

The empirical case will be analysed primarily at two levels; first there is the international level, where India and China are each other's systemic competitors in Asia. To better understand the India's foreign policy orientation, its foreign policy will also be analysed at state-level. While there will be no thorough analysis at the sub-state level, as previously mentioned, this study recognises that sub-state factors play a role in a state's foreign policy. Therefore elite consensus in regard to India's Vietnam policy will be discussed, but elite

⁵⁰ Shiping Tang, "Neoclassical Realism: Methodological Critiques and Remedies," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2023): 289–310, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/cjip/poad009>

⁵¹ Gideon Rose, "Review of *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, by Michael E. Brown, Thomas J. Christensen, Randall L. Schweller, William Curti Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054068>

consensus will not be employed as an intervening variable as this would suggest a thorough discussion of a sub-state factor, which is beyond the scope of this study.

This study approaches the case from a state centric viewpoint. As Norrin M. Ripsman et al., observes, various actors operate internationally, including epistemic communities and other small and large actors, however it is states that are considered to be the international system's primary units.⁵²

India's Foreign Policy Executives

As a neoclassical realist study, this study recognises the important role of FPEs in foreign policy making, even if this study limits the study of FPEs and sub-state level factors to a minimum, while providing a more in-depth analysis at the state and structural levels.

Norrin M. Ripsman et al, argue that it is important to determine who the important actors are, and the foreign policy executives are individuals who are responsible for a state's foreign policy, such as the head of government, the minister of foreign affairs, and the minister of defense. While the FPEs do not include the entire government, their numbers differ based on certain factors, for instance what type of government a state has. In a democratic state for example, in order to identify the individuals making up the FPEs, one should look at whether such an individual participates in the evaluations of the main economic, diplomatic and military imperatives.⁵³

⁵² Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "The Neoclassical Realist Research Paradigm and Its Independent Variable," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-57, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0003>

⁵³ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "A Methodology of Neoclassical Realism," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 99-138, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0006>

Chapter 4: The Narendra Modi Government, 2014-2024

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is arranged as follows; the chapter begins with a discussion of India's national interests and strategic orientation to provide an overview of India's foreign policy orientation, before proceeding to the case study. The empirical case analysis is structured along the two hypotheses as stated in the introductory chapter, where the section titled "The Act East Policy as a Causal Factor" corresponds with the first hypothesis, while the section titled "China as a Causal Factor" corresponds with hypothesis two.

4.2 India's Interests and Strategy: Change or Continuity?

This section treats national interests and India's strategic orientation together, because India's strategy is dependent on its national interests. As this section will demonstrate, there is not full scholarly consensus in regard to whether significant changes have occurred following the new government in 2014. Furthermore, there is at times contested versions of what strategic autonomy means for India, and whether or not India still adheres to this strategy.

For Vikash Chandra, a major foreign policy change can be said to occur when substantial deviations from the current foreign policy's goals and strategies take place. This results in a substantial redefinition of goals, while strategy is adjusted to suit the needs of the reoriented goals.⁵⁴

Vikash Chandra argues that analysts who see major changes to Indian foreign policy following the newly elected prime minister in 2014, focus on variables at the individual level, and largely ignore the importance of structural and state-level variables in a state's foreign policy. While he sees a level of rejuvenation in areas such as alignments, he still sees continuity in India's foreign policy aims and strategy.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Vikash Chandra, "Modi Government and Changing Patterns in Indian Foreign Policy," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 21, no.2 (2017): 98-117, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/0973598417731241>

⁵⁵ Vikash Chandra, "Modi Government and Changing Patterns in Indian Foreign Policy," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 21, no.2 (2017): 98-117, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/0973598417731241>

On the other hand, Subrata K. Mitra et al. see some major changes to India's foreign policy orientation since Narendra Modi became prime minister. These relate to a renewed focus on the economy and technological development, where India's foreign policy is directed toward meeting this goal. Furthermore, there is a focus on national power, and the fact that India has become more assertive and less inclined to self-imposed constraints as previously, for instance in its relations with Pakistan. This, the authors assert, demonstrates the pragmatic nature of the Modi government's foreign policy, where India has cordial relations with diverse states.⁵⁶

According to Rajesh Basrur, India employed strategic autonomy in the post-Cold War era, while now, the autonomy aspect of India's current foreign policy is of a different character, because it underlines India's aim for status and security, where India opts for strategic partnerships. While Basrur notes that partnerships can be challenging to define, he suggests that strategic partnerships are characterised by factors such as an attempt to enhance military strength and to gain political support to meet objectives. Basrur notes that strategic partnerships are a way to avoid entanglement, because a partnership does not carry the same commitments as an alliance in case of conflicts. By establishing partnerships, it also indirectly puts pressure on adversaries, because an adversary becomes restrained in its strategic behaviour and might thus be open to negotiation. He sees continuity in Narendra Modi's foreign policy when it comes to the strategy of establishing multiple strategic partnerships as he argues that this adjustment began in the post-Cold War era.⁵⁷

Vikash Chandra argues that a change to Indian strategy has previously been caused by systemic changes, where strategic autonomy was employed by India at the time in response to the unipolar world order. With the emergence of a multipolar world order however, this has led India to re-consider strategic autonomy in favour of strategic partnerships which has become the preferred strategy. Within this strategy, India has sought to align with several states; however this adjustment already began under the Vajpayee government and has since grown stronger.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Subrata K. Mitra, Jivanta Schottli, and Markus Pauli, *Statecraft and Foreign Policy: India, 1947-2023* (Dublin: DCU Press, 2023), 289.

⁵⁷ Rajesh Basrur, "Modi's foreign policy fundamentals: a trajectory unchanged," *International Affairs* 93, no.1 (January 2017): 7–26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iw006>

⁵⁸ Vikash Chandra, "Modi Government and Changing Patterns in Indian Foreign Policy," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 21, no.2 (2017): 98-117, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/0973598417731241>

According to Ian Hall, India has employed the strategy of multialignment to avoid becoming exceedingly dependent on major powers either military, politically or economically, although Hall still sees commitment to strategic autonomy. For Hall, multialignment has three components; Indian membership in groupings such as BRICS, India's bilateral strategic partnerships, and normative hedging, which suggests that India does not offend the major power and functions as a flexible state open to talks. Strategic partnerships, it is argued, allows India to access intelligence, technology, markets etc. Hall suggests that the current government's multialignment builds on inherited version, but seeks to expand it.⁵⁹

The normative aspect which Ian Hall refers to above, means less in a realist than say constructivist study, unless it is due to strategic calculations, however this study primarily focuses on the accept of multialignment which concerns the bilateral strategic partnerships as he mentioned, which in this case relates to Vietnam.

4.3 The Act East Policy as a Causal Factor

When Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014, the Look East Policy (LEP) had already been in place since the early 1990s.

Under the Look East Policy however, Mayilvaganan observes, certain mainland Southeast Asian states, including Vietnam, were less prioritised than others. This however has changed under India's Act East Policy (AEP) from 2014, which is a more comprehensive policy, which also expands beyond ASEAN to include states in the Western Pacific and East Asia.⁶⁰

In this context, one might refer to Norrin M. Ripsman et al. point out that structure alone is not responsible for all foreign policies, because states' choices matter in determining the outcomes following the selected foreign policies choices and grand strategies.⁶¹

Therefore, India's foreign policy course from 2014 was set according to how the new government perceived the international system, but also based on whether structural and domestic constraints would allow the Modi government to shape such policies. Since the

⁵⁹ Ian Hall, "Multialignment and Indian Foreign Policy under Narendra Modi." *The Round Table* 105, no. 3 (2016): 271–86, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/00358533.2016.1180760>

⁶⁰ M. Mayilvaganan, "Introduction: ASEAN and India: navigating shifting geopolitics," in *ASEAN AND INDIA-ASEAN RELATIONS: NAVIGATING SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS*, ed. M. Mayilvaganan (London: Routledge, 2022), 7.

⁶¹ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 89.

Look East Policy had already been in place for decades, both under Congress and BJP-led governments, this seems to indicate elite consensus among the FPEs as far as India's foreign policy orientation toward Vietnam and Southeast Asia was concerned.

Sumit Ganguly emphasises two elements of the Act East Policy, which is the commercial and the security aspect, with the latter being concerned with China's presence in Southeast Asia. Ganguly sees certain changes to India's foreign policy under the Modi government from the previous government toward China, which has been possible due to limited obstacles domestically. Furthermore, domestically both India's main political parties, the BJP and the Congress fear an assertive China, and thus favours defense cooperation with the United States. Furthermore, Ganguly sees a departure from strategic autonomy, while another change to Indian foreign policy is the stronger centralised decision- making.⁶²

In fact Rajesh Basrur argues that within his own political party, the Congress, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was politically constrained. In contrast, Prime Minister Modi's BJP-led government vastly dominates his National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition, and Narendra Modi is more powerful within his own BJP party.⁶³ Therefore, one must presume that the current prime minister personally agrees with the AEP.

Yet as Vikash Chandra points out, it is the structural variables which help determine the way and with whom a state pursues its national interests with. This is the result of the anarchic system, which provides incentives or restricts alignment patterns. In the case of India, Chandra notes, a change of strategy is occurring from strategic autonomy to multialignment, which is the result of strategic partnerships.⁶⁴

The Narendra Modi government, Marwah & Nga argue, has from start made changes to India's foreign policy, and such changes include a more proactive, dynamic and an assertive foreign policy. Empirically, this has been characterised by a new sense of engagements with diverse countries, including a state visit to Vietnam in 2016 that marked the first visit by an Indian prime minister in fifteen years. There is an agreement between some national interests of India and Vietnam, and a common understanding vis-à-vis the regional and global

⁶² Sumit Ganguly, "Has Modi Truly Changed India's Foreign Policy?" *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2017): 131–43, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1328929>

⁶³ Rajesh Basrur, "Modi's foreign policy fundamentals: a trajectory unchanged," *International Affairs* 93, no.1 (January 2017): 7–26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iw006>

⁶⁴ Vikas Chandra, "Modi Government and Changing Patterns in Indian Foreign Policy," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 21, no.2 (2017): 98-117, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/0973598417731241>

organisations. The two authors have also identified traits of Vietnam in the India's Act East Policy.⁶⁵

Since this study uses high level exchanges as a measure to what degree India attaches importance to another state, the visit to Vietnam by an Indian prime minister in 2016 is significant. This is because it demonstrates the Modi government's commitment to India's Vietnam policy and at a more general level, to its Act East Policy.

Vietnam's Importance as a Southeast Asian State

The purpose of this section is to show that under the hypothesis relates to the Act East Policy, the India-Vietnam engagement often forms part of India's relations with Southeast Asian states.

According to Viraj Solanki, ASEAN meetings are a place for India and Vietnam to share mutual security concerns in a multilateral setting, while the Indo Pacific vision offers both states the opportunity to cooperate in maritime security. Empirically, the defense and security cooperation have resulted in bilateral agreements, lines of defense credit etc.⁶⁶

Prior to the Modi government, Southeast Asia was an important place for India. As David Brewster points out, India's strategic objectives in Southeast Asia were as follows; to become the main power in the north-eastern part of the Indian Ocean, and to play a larger strategic role in Southeast Asia and the Indo Pacific. It is also important for India to counter China's influence in Southeast Asia. Writing in 2013, Brewster argues that India was a weaker power than China, and thus had to be flexible and discreet in its engagement with Southeast Asia until its relative power grew. At the time Brew argued that India's naval modernisation over the preceding decade related to the northeast Indian Ocean had taken place, where India's own Andaman and Nicobar Islands are located. Brewster points to Vietnam as an important regional defense relationship for India.⁶⁷ This witness of an Indian foreign policy orientation

⁶⁵ Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga, "Foreign Policies of Vietnam and India: Articulating Convergences, in *India-Vietnam Relations: Development Dynamics and Strategic Alignment* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 45-68, https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1007/978-981-16-7822-6_3

⁶⁶ Viraj Solanki, "India-Vietnam Defence and Security Cooperation," *India Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2021): 219-237, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211004982>

⁶⁷ David Brewster, "India's Defense Strategy and the India-ASEAN Relationship," *India Review* 12, no.3 (2013): 151-164, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/14736489.2013.820987>

prior to the Modi government, which already sought to engage Vietnam and the region through the Look East Policy, and therefore much of this engagement had been structurally-driven as well as driven by realist ideals, which has since continued in volume.

Rahul Mishra sees ASEAN+1 as the impetus for India-Vietnam relations, because both states are included in the grouping. Moreover, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), and the East Asia Summit are also emphasised due to their importance for India's bilateral relations with Vietnam.⁶⁸

In summary, India holds a favourable view of Southeast Asian states, as these states do not have disputes with India the same way as some states in South Asia have. In this sense, it makes sense for India to engage the region.

India's Indo Pacific Objectives

The Indo Pacific, as envisioned by the Modi government, forms part of the Act East Policy. Therefore this section seeks to place the Indo Pacific as a political concept within its correct context, and it is important to demonstrate that Vietnam forms part of this.

G.V.C Naidu points out that the term *Indo Pacific* has been in use extensively in recent years, although no broadly accepted definition exists. India, Naidu argues, is the main power in the Indian Ocean, and for the purpose of this study, it agrees with Naidu, who argues that the term *Indo Pacific* might be limited to include the East Indian Ocean and West Pacific Ocean regions.⁶⁹ Such a boundary makes sense to this study due to the research question, where the boundaries need to be sufficiently large to include countries and regions such as India, China and Southeast Asia, but need not for instance, to encompass the whole ocean basins of the two oceans.

Chietigj Bajpae argues that as a geopolitical term, the *Indo Pacific* is in alignment with India's vision of an increased area of strategic importance.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Rahul Mishra, "Vietnam's Regional Security Perceptions and Priorities: Role of India," *India Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2021): 200-218, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211004983>

⁶⁹ G. V. C. Naidu, "India-Vietnam Strategic Partnership in the Emerging Indo-Pacific Construct," *India Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (2021): 172-184, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211005010>

⁷⁰ Chietigj Bajpae, "Dephasing India's Look East/Act East Policy," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, no.2 (2017): 348-72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44683773>

Indeed, India's Indo Pacific objectives are linked with the AEP, both of which have strong security aspects to them. This argument might find support with Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar, who has suggested that India and ASEAN can contribute to stability and security in the Indo Pacific.⁷¹

According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Prime Minister Modi highlighted Vietnam's importance for the AEP, but also the importance of Vietnam in regard to India's overall cooperation with ASEAN to the President of Vietnam, Tran Dai Quang and Vietnamese delegates on their state visit to India. Narendra Modi also emphasised the importance of an Indo Pacific that is open and independent, while emphasising the common goal of a rules-based regional architecture in the maritime domain.⁷²

Prime Minister Modi's statements are significant, because it helps to demonstrate that Indian foreign policy has a place for Vietnam in its Indo Pacific vision via the AEP. This linkage is likely to continue in accordance with the growth in India's relative power. At this point it is unlikely that India's national interests in the region contract anytime soon due to its economic growth, which means that India can afford to pursue its interests. Currently, India is not met with much resistance either, except from China and a few other states. Vietnam is a state which does not feel threatened by an increase in Indian power.

Sanghamitra Sarma has examined India's relations with Vietnam through the lens of the Indo Pacific, and notes that India and Vietnam have been influential in establishing a regional balance in the Indo Pacific. Both states seek a rules-based and inclusive Indo Pacific. While Sarma argues that in a geopolitical contested theatre, India and Vietnam share similar visions regarding the Indo Pacific construct, and a secure shared maritime environment contributes to achieving goals for both India and Vietnam.⁷³

⁷¹ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "Address by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Chulalongkorn University on "India's Vision of the Indo-Pacific"," August 18,2022, accessed May 11, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/35641/address+by+external+affairs+minister+dr+s+jaishankar+at+the+chulalongkorn+university+on+indias+vision+of+the+indopacific>

⁷² Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "English Translation of Press Statement by Prime Minister during the State visit of President of Vietnam (March 03,2018)," March 03, 2018, accessed May 7, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29537/english+translation+of+press+statement+by+prime+minister+during+the+state+visit+of+president+of+vietnam+march+03+2018>

⁷³ Sanghamitra Sarma, "India–Vietnam Relations through the Prism of the Indo-Pacific Concept," *Strategic Analysis* 44, no.4 (2020): 360–377, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/09700161.2020.1809213>

For Sanghamitra Sarma, science and technology have been important elements in the India-Vietnam cooperation due to their importance for sharing strategic information. Moreover, Sarma emphasises that the Indo Pacific is dependent on technology due to maritime security, where it is argued that the Modi government has identified Vietnam as being of great importance for India's goals that seek to secure regional stability in the Indo Pacific at a time the world experiences a shift in the vehicle of global economic growth in favour of the Indo Pacific.⁷⁴

The Indian FPEs often speak of a rising India and India's strategies, of which one such example will be provided below.

During a speech at Chulalongkorn University in 2022 on India's Indo Pacific vision, Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar emphasised that India's move from the LEP to the AEP was in accordance with India's growing interests abroad following an increase in political and economic prominence. Jaishankar specifically pointed to the fact that India's Indo Pacific vision builds on its Act East Policy.⁷⁵ Indeed, Viraj Solanki also traces certain developments to the India-Vietnam relations back to the 1990s when he argues that the 1994 security and defense agreement between India and Vietnam served as the beginning of the cooperation between the two states that has since developed over time, particularly in recent years.⁷⁶

This specific linkage to the Act East Policy further demonstrates the explanatory power of the first hypothesis. This is because Vietnam forms part of India's Act East Policy, while the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is an empirical outcome rooted in the AEP.

In summer 2021, India and Vietnam conducted a bilateral maritime exercise to strengthen their defense ties. Over the years, the overall cooperation in naval training has increased,⁷⁷ which is an important empirical development to their relations.

⁷⁴ Sanghamitra Sarma, "India-Vietnam Relations through the Prism of the Indo-Pacific Concept," *Strategic Analysis* 44, no.4 (2020): 360–377, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/09700161.2020.1809213>

⁷⁵ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "Address by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the Chulalongkorn University on "India's Vision of the Indo-Pacific"," August 18, 2022, accessed May 11, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/35641/address+by+external+affairs+minister+dr+s+jaishankar+at+the+chulalongkorn+university+on+indias+vision+of+the+indopacific>

⁷⁶ Viraj Solanki, "India-Vietnam Defence and Security Cooperation," *India Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2021): 219-237, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211004982>

⁷⁷ Indian Navy, "Indian Navy undertakes Bilateral Maritime Exercise with Vietnam People's Navy," accessed May 11, 2024, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy-undertakes-bilateral-maritime-exercise-vietnam-people%E2%80%99s-navy>

In spite of the empirical developments, it is important to remember that, as Van & Trung point out, Vietnam does not form alliances with other states, although strategic partnerships can be considered important for Vietnam due to the absence of alliance formation.⁷⁸

Furthermore, Ma & Kang argue that Vietnam's under-reaction to a growth in Chinese power is due to many years of mutual engagement, and accordingly, Vietnam and China have reached a *modus Vivendi* which settles disputes. When it comes to China, Vietnam does not show signs of a major shift to its foreign policy being underway where Vietnam begins to openly balance against China. Moreover, Vietnam shares strong economic relations with China. In this sense, the two authors challenge conventional wisdom regarding the East Asian security arrangements.⁷⁹

Indeed, certain aspects of the above observations by Ma & Kang seem to be contrary to realist logic and more in consistent with the liberal inter-dependency theory, where both China and Vietnam benefit from their economic interdependency. Still, from a realist perspective, this does not exclude the fact that China can still be an important factor for why India engages Vietnam. This is because India has not requested a formal alliance from Vietnam, and India can still utilise Vietnam as a resource even if Vietnam and China benefit in some ways from their relationship with each other.

In 2014, David Brewster predicted that while India has experienced much economic growth which has provided it with material capabilities, India continues to face constraints from China.⁸⁰ As long as this continues, both the Indian economic growth and constraints from China, then India will seek to engage Vietnam and other Asian states as well as the US.

Yoder & Bajpai argue that India is concerned about China's military presence in the Indian Ocean, and Chinese economic interests in South Asia. While it is also argued that India is concerned over China's cordial relationship with Pakistan, this aspect will be discussed in a later section. China on the other hand, is concerned about India's improved relations with the US, where India cooperates with the US in multilateral fora, while China is also concerned

⁷⁸ Nguyen Khanh Van and Nguyen Xuan Trung, "Vietnam and the United States: A Strategic Partnership in the Future?" *India Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2021): 238-251, [https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211005034](https://doi.org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211005034)

⁷⁹ Xinru Ma and David C. Kang, "Why Vietnam Is Not Balancing China: Vietnamese Security Priorities and the Dynamics in Sino-Vietnam Relations." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 23, no. 3 (2023): 363–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2023.16>

⁸⁰ David Brewster, *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership* (London: Routledge, 2014), 1.

about India's cooperation with other Indo Pacific states as it fears balance behaviour toward China.⁸¹

Even if India and the US have more often than not had a restrained relationship, then from a realist perspective, India is likely to seek US support if India feels it is not on its own capable of countering Chinese influence. This is pragmatism.

Miller & De Estrada acknowledge that there is pragmatism to the Modi government's foreign policy, but their use of the term *pragmatism* is used in a broader sense, thus allowing for more than merely power and interest. This so called procedural pragmatism in India's foreign policy engages with various often modified ideational factors, and therefore there is not an entire break with past foreign policies. Instead, ideational innovation is suited for a realist foreign policy underpinned by revisionism, where a certain idea can be relevant in a specific political context. The Modi government's foreign policy is therefore not exclusively driven by interests and power, but also draws on domestic ideas where it navigates between ideas, for instance from Hinduism, but also institutionalised ideas such as Indian exceptionalism, and post-colonial viewpoints.⁸²

While some of this makes sense from a realist viewpoint, some do not. This is because although no realist is likely to dispute the importance of Hinduism to much of the Indian population, then a realist is likely to dispute that religion matters more than realism in the current Indian foreign policy. For instance, while India and Vietnam might not find common ground based on Communism and Hinduism, this can from a realist stance be adjusted so that the focus instead is on China or another topic which both agree on.

Geopolitical Strategies in the Indian Ocean

Subrata K. Mitra et al. provides a specific empirical example of the China-India rivalry when she argues that the asymmetry regarding submarine technology and personnel between India and China in the latter's favour. To balance this difference, India has established partnerships

⁸¹ Brandon K. Yoder and Kanti Bajpai, "Introduction: Explaining Cooperation and Rivalry in China-India Relations." *Journal of Contemporary China* 32, no. 141 (2023): 353–68, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/10670564.2022.2090068>

⁸² Manjari Chatterjee Miller and Kate Sullivan De Estrada, "Pragmatism in Indian Foreign Policy: How Ideas Constrain Modi," *International Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2017): 27–49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48587129>

with maritime states, where the Indo-Pacific strategic vision is importance for India, because it will form part of a counter to China's influence and material capabilities.⁸³

According to Subrata K. Mitra et al., a strategic autonomy posture would allow India for an independent international geopolitical course, although debates have been whether or not India prefers bilateral means for negotiations.⁸⁴

Marwah & Nga argue that Vietnam, while having strong economic relations with China, still has formed comprehensive partnerships with India and Japan, which allows it to strategically negotiate with China with more heft. India and Vietnam seek the Indo Pacific to be secure and with growth for all. Of the seven central elements to the Indo Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) launched by India in 2019, the most relevant to the India-Vietnam relationship is maritime security. The two authors see a correlation between Vietnam's central role in ASEAN and the central role played by ASEAN in Indo Pacific. Furthermore, it is argued that it was Vietnam that internationalised the SCS dispute, which was done to limit its gap of asymmetry with China and for a rules-based resolution to the dispute.⁸⁵

4.4 China as a Causal Factor

For the second hypothesis to be of relevance, then the analysis must demonstrate India's threat perception of China, and as a result of this, India looks for support from Vietnam to strengthen its political and security relations. Whether or not it is Vietnam's intention to counter-balance China is less relevant, because the hypothesis is from an Indian perspective. Still, it is important to demonstrate that India engages Vietnam because of China, and that Vietnam at least allows India to utilise it as a resource in this process.

Quid Pro Quo: India's Vietnam Policy for China's Pakistan Policy

⁸³ Subrata K. Mitra, Jivanta Schottli, and Markus Pauli, "India, ASEAN, the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific," in *Statecraft and Foreign Policy: India 1947-2023* (Dublin: DCU Press, 2023), 243–56, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.13049259.25>

⁸⁴ Subrata K. Mitra, Jivanta Schottli, and Markus Pauli, "[Part 3: Introduction]," in *Statecraft and Foreign Policy: India 1947-2023* (Dublin: DCU Press, 2023), 199–200, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.13049259.22>

⁸⁵ Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga, "Multilateral Engagement: Envisioning a Peaceful, Cooperative Multilateral Architecture," in: *India–Vietnam Relations: Development Dynamics and Strategic Alignment* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 119–41, https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1007/978-981-16-7822-6_6

The section seeks to demonstrate that one reason why China plays a causal role in India's relationship with Vietnam is due to China's engagement with Pakistan. Therefore the point here is that one might view India's Vietnam policy as an attempt to engage Vietnam to counter China's Pakistan policy.

Historically, British India was divided into India and Pakistan in 1947; however the two states have remained rivals. A further division occurred following their war with each other in 1971, which resulted in Pakistan's loss of its eastern territory which became Bangladesh. Still, India and Pakistan continued to view one another as a security threat.

Iskander Rehman argues that China has attempted to contain India in South Asia, while checking its ambitions to become an emerging power, while he also claims that China has relied on the realist balance of power strategy, which has been reflected in China's assistance to Pakistan, India's competitor in South Asia. At the same time Rahman argues that the areas of interests for both India and China have gradually increased.⁸⁶

Other scholars have also shown that India strongly opposes China's engagement with Pakistan. According to Allan Bloomfield, India considers the BRI to be strategic, and particularly one BRI project has caused concern, which is the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Due to Indian public opinion following the Galwan Valley incident in 2020, Bloomfield argues that any Indian political party seeking to accommodate China will seem weak.⁸⁷

For Marwah & Nga, one reason for India and Vietnam to cooperate strategically is because both Vietnam and China lay claims to the Spratly and Paracel Islands. While India does not lay claim to the SCS, it seeks to secure its economic interests there as well as to secure the trade flows. Marwah & Nga highlight that while India is not part of BRI, its neighbours are, and the CPEC corridor runs through a disputed territory between India and Pakistan.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Iskander Rehman, "Keeping the Dragon at Bay: India's Counter-Containment of China in Asia," *Asian Security* 5, no.2 (2009): 114-143, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/14799850902885114>

⁸⁷ Allan Bloomfield, "The India-China Bilateral Relationship: A 'Serious and Enduring Rivalry,'" *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 17, no. 1 (2021): 5-23, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/19480881.2021.1878580>

⁸⁸ Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga, "The China Challenge: Strategic and Security Cooperation," in: *India-Vietnam Relations: Development Dynamics and Strategic Alignment* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 143-70, https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1007/978-981-16-7822-6_7

For China, Rajeev R. Chaturvedy notes, India's expanding interests as a natural reflection of its potentials, but when it comes to increasing Indian influence in China's own neighbourhood, it is a cause of concern.⁸⁹

Indian and Chinese Competition over Neighbourhoods

China's entrance into South Asia began long before the current government. Iskander Rehman argues that China's engagement with India's neighbours in South Asia has also been due to other factors than merely an attempt to contain India. Here trade and economic factors play a role, and from a Chinese perspective, energy security plays an important role in the calculations, where China has established naval presences at important maritime points.⁹⁰

According to Hall & Ganguly, China is the largest external constraint which India faces and India perceives China as an economic, security and political challenge due to its military modernisation, coupled with Indian uncertainty of China's intentions. This comes in addition to the Chinese trade and investments in India's neighbourhood. The two authors suggest that it has been challenging for Narendra Modi, because he became prime minister not long after President Xi Jinping became paramount leader of China in 2012/2013 which limited India's limited agency because China became more assertive.⁹¹

Vikash Chandra seems to agree with this, because due to its proximity and military capabilities, China is perceived to be the largest security threat to India.⁹²

Naturally a state does have some choice when deciding which states are perceived as threats and which states are not, even though this choice might be limited in many cases due to the international system.

⁸⁹ Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, "Modi's Neighborhood Policy and China's Response." *Issues and Studies* 55, no. 2 (2019): 1-23, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/modis-neighborhood-policy-chinas-response/docview/2437925768/se-2>

⁹⁰ Iskander Rehman, "Keeping the Dragon at Bay: India's Counter-Containment of China in Asia," *Asian Security* 5, no.2 (2009): 114-143, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/14799850902885114>

⁹¹ Ian Hall and Sumit Ganguly, "Introduction: Narendra Modi and India's Foreign Policy," *International Politics* 59, no. 1 (2022): 1-8, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/introduction-narendra-modi-india-s-foreign-policy/docview/2637590842/se-2>

⁹² Vikas Chandra, "Modi Government and Changing Patterns in Indian Foreign Policy," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations* 21, no.2 (2017): 98-117, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/0973598417731241>

In this context, it is important to refer to Norrin M. Ripsman et al. who underline that unit variables are located between the systemic level and foreign policy responses.⁹³

This effectively means that India as a state or unit is not entirely bound by the international system; because India's foreign policy choices decide how India responds to China. As India's choices under the current government unfold, it becomes apparent which choices have been made in regard to China.

At the same time, it is important to appreciate the systemic nature of the India-China relationship due to prolonged border issues. As T.V. Paul asserts, the territorial dispute between China and India began in the 1950s, yet it remains unresolved. Recently, short military flare ups have occurred, yet at the same time, the two states have strengthened their economic ties.⁹⁴

T.V. Paul suggests that the conflict between China and India has evolved in the areas it has, one needs to understand the balance of power competition, and how strategic culture can be responsible for hostile relations between the two states. He sees engagement with each other's neighbouring states as one of the reasons behind this rivalry.⁹⁵ The fact that Paul highlights this as a reason supports the hypothesis that China is a factor in the India-Vietnam relationship. This is because this section has also demonstrated that India views the Chinese presence in its neighbourhood, particularly in Pakistan, as an obstacle. Paul's statement is also true of India's modest, albeit increasing presence in China's neighbourhood, such as in Vietnam or in the South China Sea, which will be discussed later.

The India-China relationship characterised by cooperation, competition, and at times conflict can be expected from a realist point of view. As neoclassical realist, Gustav Meibauer argues, cooperation is possible in an anarchic environment, albeit challenging.⁹⁶

According to T.V. Paul, China has expanded into the Indian Ocean through its naval presence, such as the constructing of a port in Sri Lanka, whereas India has countered such

⁹³ Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, "The Neoclassical Realist Research Paradigm and Its Independent Variable," in *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-57, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0003>

⁹⁴ T.V. Paul, ed., *The China-India Rivalry in the Globalization Era* (Washington D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 3.

⁹⁵ T.V. Paul, ed., *The China-India Rivalry in the Globalization Era* (Washington D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 4-5.

⁹⁶ Gustav Meibauer, "Neorealism, neoclassical realism and the problem(s) of history," *International Relations* 37, no.2 (2023): 348-369, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178211033943>

moves through its own more frequent naval presence in Southeast Asia and by forging closer strategic ties with Vietnam and Japan. For Paul, this rivalry has sharpened after Xi Jinping became the leader of China in 2012 due to his vision of China as a global power. Under Narendra Modi, India's great power aspirations has also grown, which has resulted in systemic rivalry as the two states' power aspirations colliding in certain spheres.⁹⁷

These developments concern the second hypothesis. As Steven E. Lobell observes, a shift in a state's relative material power sets the broad patterns for its international behaviour, while it is the FPEs who are responsible for identifying changes to the regional or global power balance.⁹⁸

India's rise is underpinned by a large population and a fast growing economy. According to the World Bank, India's population stood at 1.42 billion in 2022, and India's total GDP for 2022 was 3.42 trillion.⁹⁹

Yet, while India's population figure is more than a billion more than that of the United States' figure, the Indian economy is currently much smaller. India's total economy is closer to the size of the Japan's economy, which in 2022 measured 4.26 trillion in terms of GDP.¹⁰⁰

To interpret these numbers, one might refer to Gideon Rose's argument from the theoretical chapter, where he argues that there is a correlation between a state's relative power and an ambitious foreign policy. Yet he also notes that this is not based on objective materialism, but leaders' perception in decisionmaking.¹⁰¹ In this case, India's economic in 2022 was large, but other states had even larger economies, which mean that India's power depends on its economic. Yet, since Narendra Modi's perception also matter, his reading of the situation might seek to accelerate India's influence in the world, for instance through investments in India and partnerships.

⁹⁷ T.V. Paul, ed., *The China-India Rivalry in the Globalization Era* (Washington D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 3-4.

⁹⁸ Steven E. Lobell, "Threat assessment, the state, and foreign policy: a neoclassical realist model," in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, ed. Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 44-45.

⁹⁹ World Bank, "India, Social," accessed March 26, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/india>

¹⁰⁰ World Bank, "Japan, Social," accessed March 26, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/japan>

¹⁰¹ Gideon Rose, "Review of *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, by Michael E. Brown, Thomas J. Christensen, Randall L. Schweller, William Curti Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144-72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25054068>

This importance of material power is also noted by Fareed Zakaria as he argues that a wealthy country is capable of securing a diplomatic and military apparatus that can help it meet its foreign policy objectives.¹⁰²

The South China Sea

This study does not take a stance in relation to any South China Sea dispute; however references to the disputes will be made for the sake of clarification whenever relevant to the analysis. This section forms part of China's role in the India-Vietnam relationship, and this section specifically seeks to demonstrate that the SCS is one factor that has a causal role in the strengthening of relations between India and Vietnam.

The South China Sea (SCS), Loan & Tung observe, forms part of India's strategic vision due to its maritime location in a continuous stretch of sea in the Indo Pacific, which also offers India access to important global markets. The term *Indo Pacific* reflects China's rise as an economic, political and military power, the two authors emphasise, which has contributed to a change in the regional power balance. From the perspective of Chinese national interests, it has been important to reshape the regional and international order and China's "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI) exemplifies this vision. As a counter-move, India's Indo Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), which Vietnam takes advantage of due to its multilateralisation and diversification regarding economic development, and in the area of security as it provides Vietnam with a form of balancing bargain.¹⁰³

According to Vo Xuan Vinh et al., India feels the pressure from growing Chinese influence in South Asia and in the Indian Ocean, and therefore India seeks to counter China. Still, unlike South Asia and the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea is not India's primary security priority. India and ASEAN share many of the same views regarding the SCS, while Vietnam participates in joint naval exercises with India in these waters. Still, ASEAN as a whole is

¹⁰² Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5.

¹⁰³ Huynh Thanh Loan and Nguyen Dac Tung, "Vietnam's Responses to India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiatives and Opportunities for Vietnam-India Maritime Cooperation in the South China Sea," *India Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2021): 185-199, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211005035>

conflicted regarding the SCS disputes with China which is considered to be a sensitive issue, and their welcoming of a player such as India remains limited.¹⁰⁴

According to Marwah & Nga, in the aftermath of the June 2020 border casualties between Chinese and Indian soldiers in the Himalayas, the Indian navy would later deploy a frontline war vessel to the SCS.¹⁰⁵

Yet China is more concerned about the United States than it is concerned about India. As Foot & King argue, then China seeks to weaken the role of the American role in the Asia Pacific in its current form, because China perceives the US to be hegemonic in its aim to maintain the global order. China's core interests include sovereignty claims in the SCS.¹⁰⁶

As a rising power, Shih & Yin argue that China has learnt from some lessons from realism, and China's core interests are domestic stability and territorial security. The authors seems to suggest two competing versions in Chinese foreign policy, one that prefers prestige and the protecting of China's sovereign rights, while the other strand is related to whether China should grant concessions and miss out on opportunities. Yet, as China's capacity increases, the authors assert, China refers more to its national interests.¹⁰⁷

All states are bound to follow their own national interests. While it is true that the Indian External Affairs Minister emphasised the importance of a rules-based order, which is respected by India and Vietnam, then this order in the Indo Pacific is also not in contrary to many of the littoral states' interests. The minister highlighted the evolving multi-polar Asia and that Vietnam is important both when it comes to the Indo Pacific and ASEAN contexts. Specifically, the minister stated the Act East Policy has been a guiding force in the India-

¹⁰⁴ Vo Xuan Vinh, Tran Xuan Hiep, and Vo Minh Hung "India's Engagement in the South China Sea," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 17, no. 2 (2021): 64–77. <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/09733159.2021.2022287>

¹⁰⁵ Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga, "Multilateral Engagement: Envisioning a Peaceful, Cooperative Multilateral Architecture," in: *India–Vietnam Relations: Development Dynamics and Strategic Alignment* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 119–41, https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1007/978-981-16-7822-6_6

¹⁰⁶ Rosemary Foot and Amy King, "China's world view in the Xi Jinping Era: Where do Japan, Russia and the USA fit?" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23, no.2 (2021): 210–227, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120914467>

¹⁰⁷ Chih-yu Shih and Jiwu Yin, "Between Core National Interest and a Harmonious World: Reconciling Self-Role Conceptions in Chinese Foreign Policy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6, no. 1 (2013): 59–84, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615883>

Vietnam relationship, and following this, he proclaimed the success of the AEP as it has been widened to an Indo Pacific approach better suited for India's strategic interests.¹⁰⁸

According to the Indian Navy, the deployment of vessels to the South China Sea was rooted in India's AEP as well as the navy's attempt to play a uniting role in maritime interactions with East and South East Asian states. While Indian naval ships had made a gestural call to Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, the ships proceeded to Qingdao in China to take part in 70th anniversary of the PLA (Navy) in April 2019.¹⁰⁹

For Sanghamitra Sarma, the SCS has often brought India and Vietnam in alignment due to shared concerns. For instance, it is argued that Vietnam has accused China of entering its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) at the time when China carried out seismic surveys in these waters. As a result of India's Oil and Natural Gas Commission Videsh (ONGC), India has interests in the SCS and is therefore interested in maritime security.¹¹⁰

Marwah & Nga note that in regard to the SCS, Vietnam wants to engage India as India has invested in deep sea exploration, China opposes this.¹¹¹ For Pankaj K. Jha, the South China Sea is important for India in terms of energy and its geostrategic importance.¹¹²

Based on the above, a neoclassical realist might argue that Indian energy exploration in the South China Sea both have a strategic and economic aspect to it.

Thuong & Oanh suggest that apart from Vietnam's geographical location toward the South China Sea, which is an important area for its maritime trade, then Vietnam is also perceived as neutral due to the practice of the "four-no's", which refer to no to military alliances, no to foreign military bases in Vietnam, no to supporting one state against another state, and no to

¹⁰⁸ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "Address by the External Affairs Minister at the celebration of 5th Anniversary of India-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2016-2021)," December 17, 2021, accessed May 7, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34698/address+by+the+external+affairs+minister+at+the+celebration+of+5th+anniversary+of+indiavietnam+comprehensive+strategic+partnership+20162021>

¹⁰⁹ Indian Navy, "Indian Naval Ships Kolkata and Shakti are at Qingdao, China to Participate in IFR to Mark 70th Anniversary of PLA (Navy)," accessed May 7, 2024, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-naval%C2%A0ships-kolkata-and-shakti-are-at%C2%A0qingdao-china-participate-ifr-mark-70th>

¹¹⁰ Sanghamitra Sarma, "India-Vietnam Relations through the Prism of the Indo-Pacific Concept," *Strategic Analysis* 44, no.4 (2020): 360–377. <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/09700161.2020.1809213>

¹¹¹ Reena Marwah and Le Thi Hang Nga, "The China Challenge: Strategic and Security Cooperation," in: *India-Vietnam Relations: Development Dynamics and Strategic Alignment* (Singapore: Springer. 2021), 143-70, https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1007/978-981-16-7822-6_7

¹¹² Pankaj K. Jha, "India-Vietnam Relations: Need for Enhanced Cooperation," *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 6 (2008): 1085–99, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/09700160802404570>

being coercive in its relations with other states. Vietnam is thus perceived to be desirable partner to cooperate with in relation to regional and international security.¹¹³

However when it comes to China's relationship with Vietnam, things are different. As Vo Xuan Vinh argues, while communism is an important element in the Vietnamese-Chinese relations, there exist disputes in their relations, not least in regard to the SCS disputes. Still, Vietnam's economic dependence on China has caused it to be political dependent on China. At the same time, Vinh argues that Vietnam views India as a reliable partner in security, whether in terms of the training of Vietnamese military personnel or bilateral cooperation in oil and gas, which is of strategic importance.¹¹⁴

Finally, Rahul Mishra notes that a code of conduct (COC) binding on the South China Sea has not been successfully negotiated yet. For Mishra, Vietnam's relations with China are multilayered, not least due to both states' overlapping claims in the SCS, but China is also a partner and a neighbour. At the same time, Mishra notes that Vietnam is integrated into the India's infrastructural connectivity projects in the Indo Pacific.¹¹⁵

The final paragraph illustrates that a situation might be more nuanced than it appears to be. Moreover, it is worth emphasising that the regional construct is still under evolution.

4.5 Relations between the two Causal Factors (Hypotheses)

This section discusses both hypotheses together, because as Yoder & Bajpai point out that one must be aware of omission bias, where explanations are centered on a single causal factor. On the other hand, if a study has different hypotheses, it is necessary to understand if these are competing hypotheses, while each hypothesis must be assigned its correct relative weight vis-à-vis the other hypotheses.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Nguyen Le Thy Thuong and Nguyen Thi Oanh, "Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific Region: Perception, Position and Perspectives," *India Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2021): 129-142. <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211005036>

¹¹⁴ Vo Xuan Vinh, "India in Vietnam's Foreign Policy." *Strategic Analysis* 44, no. 1 (2020): 31-44. <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/09700161.2020.1699997>

¹¹⁵ Rahul Mishra, "Vietnam's Regional Security Perceptions and Priorities: Role of India," *India Quarterly* 77, no.2 (2021): 200-218, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09749284211004983>

¹¹⁶ Brandon K. Yoder and Kanti Bajpai, "Introduction: Explaining Cooperation and Rivalry in China-India Relations." *Journal of Contemporary China* 32, no. 141 (2023): 353-68, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/10670564.2022.2090068>

There is no concern of omission bias in regard to Yoder & Bajpai's first point, since this study has more than a single causal factor, but it is important to explain the role of India's Act East Policy and China as causal factors together, because at times these two factors overlap. It is a fact that China plays a role in India's AEP in several instances.

According to Tran Viet Thai, there is uncertainty in the strategic environment of East Asia following changes to the regional order. Thai argues that states have been forced to reconsider their policies, both states within and outside of the region. Thai argues that from a Vietnamese perspective, the main challenge has been to navigate between a rising China that is revisionist, and a status quo seeking US. According to Thai, Vietnam is in favour of the current US-led regional order, because this order has sustained due to reasons such as ASEAN who has mediated between great powers, regional institutions where actors have interacted and a reasonable stable balance of power system. Although a Southeast Asian state, Vietnam has also become more active and gained influence and adheres to the idea of open regionalism where no single power should dominate.¹¹⁷

The above observations illustrate two areas in which the two hypotheses overlap. First, there is the talk of a changing regional order and then there is China. In the case of the changing regional order in East Asia, while this is quite far from India, then India's Act East Policy also seeks for India to have a presence in this part of Asia, which is also where China is located.

Second, East Asia is an adjacent region to Southeast Asia where India has been present for a number of years and where Vietnam is located. Here below is a case of India's power projection.

In accordance with India's Act East Policy, the INS Satpura and INS Kadmat naval ships were deployed to East and Southeast Asia for three months in late 2017, including Vietnam. During deployment, the ships participated in the commemoration of 25 years of ASEAN-India dialogue.¹¹⁸ This is significant, because it is important also to interpret the Indian-Vietnamese relations from the perspective of India's regional presence in Southeast Asia. The

¹¹⁷ Tran Viet Thai, "The Evolving Regional Order in East Asia: A View from Vietnam." *Asia Policy* 13, no. 2 (04, 2018): 64-68, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/evolving-regional-order-east-asia-view-vietnam/docview/2036387234/se-2>

¹¹⁸ Indian Navy, "Eastern Fleet Ships on Overseas Deployment to East and South-East Asia," accessed May 12, 2024, <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/eastern-fleet-ships-overseas-deployment-east-and-south-east-asia>

AEP was never meant solely focus on Vietnam, and one reason why Vietnam is attractive for India is arguably due to India's focus on ASEAN of which Vietnam is a member state.

Furthermore, during Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar's visit to Vietnam in October 2023, he discussed the progress of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the Vietnamese prime minister and foreign minister. As previously hinted, the main rationale behind the partnership was to enhance cooperation in security and defense even if cooperation in several other sectors, such as trade was intended. Perhaps most symbolically in terms of security enhancement was Jaishankar's visit to an Indian navy sail training ship that was on a port call in Vietnam.¹¹⁹

The empirical example above might find reasoning with Rajeev R. Chaturvedy, who argues that the Modi government has redefined India's traditional neighbourhood to include a broader geographical area, while the maritime domain has been included in its neighbourhood policy.¹²⁰

Power as a Shaping Factor

According to Ruizhuang Zhang, the single most important factor in East Asia's international relations is power, and an increase in Chinese power will lead to changes in the regional power balance structure. For Zhang, national power can be defined as the nation's power in these critical areas; natural endowment, which relate to factors such as the size of the country and its population, and economic and military strength. In this context, China's national power has widened, and therefore China wants to secure its regional national interests. Yet as Zhang notes, not all claims in the SCS are mutually exclusive. China for instance, agrees with the American point of view that the US can have a passage through international waters. Zhang argues that while the US seeks the status quo for East Asia, China seeks change, and that the balance of power strategy is used by great powers to avoid the emergence of a new superpower.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "Visit of External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar to Vietnam (15-18 October, 2023)," October 18, 2023, accessed May 13, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37196/visit-of-external-affairs-minister-dr-s-jaishankar-to-vietnam-october-15-18-2023>

¹²⁰ Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, "Modi's Neighborhood Policy and China's Response." *Issues and Studies* 55, no. 2 (2019): 1-23, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/modis-neighborhood-policy-chinas-response/docview/2437925768/se-2>

¹²¹ Ruizhuang Zhang, "The Future of Power Politics in East Asia," in *The Future of East Asia*, ed. Peter Hayes and Chung-In Moon (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 47-79, https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1007/978-981-10-4977-4_3

Ruizhuang Zhang argues that for a state to be revisionist, it needs to be very powerful, because power is required to change an existing world order. At the time of writing in 2017, Zhang argues that China was not yet powerful enough to be revisionist in practical terms, even if it was perceived as such. Furthermore, he argues that the US-led global order has been inclusive and accommodating, however should the US change the rules in regard to China, for instance by attempting to hinder its rise, then the situation might change.¹²²

In Don McLain Gill's neoclassical realist study of Vietnam's relations with India, he notices the presence of structure in India's relations with Vietnam, such as in the sphere of security due to the power rivalry between the US and China. Yet, he argues that whereas structural realism presumes that states are unitary, he suggests that NCR's use below systemic level factors can better explain a state's foreign policy. This is because he claims that NCR can explain why Vietnam engages India at a faster level on the issue of security, than it engages Japan, South Korea or Australia, which would make more sense from a structural, utility-maximizing way on the basis of arms and economic transactions. Viewed through the prism of neoclassical realism, Gill argues that Vietnam's India policy reflects the ambition of self-reliance, multi-alignment, while at the same time avoiding being party to the structural rivalry between China and the US and therefore India could serve as a strategic buffer.¹²³

While structure is an important factor, the above argument also witnesses the importance of factors that are not only based on the system, but that other factors have also helped shape India's relationship with Vietnam. Even if the most important factors are indeed structural, then for Vietnam, India appears to be a flexible state which accepts that Vietnam is a communist state. The reason why this acceptance does not appear to be the case in the India-China relationship is due to structural factors which India is not willing to ignore.

According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), India's military expenditure for 2023 was 83.6 billion dollars, which was a 4.2% increase since 2022. In

¹²² Ruizhuang Zhang, "Despite the 'New Assertiveness,' China Is Not Up for Challenging the Global Order," in *Will China's Rise Be Peaceful? The Rise of a Great Power in Theory, History, Politics, and the Future*, ed. Asle Toje (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 231-250, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/oso/9780190675387.003.0012>

¹²³ Don McLain Gill, "Locating the Evolving Vietnam-India Security Partnership in Hanoi's Hedging Strategy with Major Powers: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis," *Millennial Asia* (Nov, 2023): <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09763996231211510>

contrast, SIPRI's estimated number for China's military spending in 2023 was 296 billion dollars, which was a 6% increase from the previous year.¹²⁴

These figures suggest that both states make realist predictions, and therefore China is likely to continue to play a large role in India's Vietnam policy.

4.6 Conclusions

In the last ten years, India's foreign policy toward Vietnam has witnessed a number of improvements, such as the upgrade to the comprehensive strategic partnership and a more visible Indian navy presence in Vietnamese waters. The bilateral relationship was established prior to 2014, yet improvements have been made, which illustrates that the Modi government prioritises this relationship.

The assumption that the Modi government does so, can be backed by pointing to Tang Shiping, who notes that while neoclassical realism can explain states' security strategies, then Tang argues that if the state's elites agree on a specific policy, then this means the state is unitary and one can expect the policy to become a reality.¹²⁵

Since NCR places great importance to the role of states, it was expected that this relationship is not due to the current government's efforts alone, but rather due to its effort to further strengthen the relationship following the government's threat perception of China, but also as India's relative strength has increased over the years, which is reflected in India's more visible presence in Southeast Asia of which Vietnam is a part.

¹²⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "Global military spending surges amid war, rising tensions and insecurity," accessed May 10, 2024, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/global-military-spending-surges-amid-war-rising-tensions-and-insecurity>

¹²⁵ Shiping Tang, "Neoclassical Realism: Methodological Critiques and Remedies," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (2023): 289–310 <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1093/cjip/poad009>

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

Having examined the empirical case in the preceding chapter, this concluding chapter will summarise the study, and discuss the findings. Specifically, the argument, research question and the validity of the hypotheses will be discussed. The research question proposed in the introductory chapter was: ***Why does Indian foreign policy under the Narendra Modi government emphasise Vietnam as a resource to utilise?***

5.2 Summary of Findings

The aim of the case study has been to understand why India has chosen to utilise Vietnam as a resources. To this end, the thesis proposes two hypotheses. For clarification, each hypothesis will form its own sub-heading, under which the key findings in regard to that hypothesis will be presented.

H1: India emphasises Vietnam as a resource to utilise because Vietnam has gained a renewed focus in India's foreign policy due to India's Act East Policy.

For this hypothesis to be answered, it is important to understand the role of theory (NCR) and the empirical findings, such as those made by the area experts or from Indian government sources.

First, the independent variable of this study is India's relative power, and this power has grown under the Modi government due to population growth, economic growth, the strengthening of relationships with more states etc.

To draw a comparison to the time before 2014, one might point to David Brewster's 2011 article, which suggests that India's strategic thinking focused on the maritime at the time, because India aspired to become a naval power. As part of this vision, naval power projecting into Southeast Asia became important, although cautiously doing so in cooperation with other

states. Brewster argues that due to fears of Chinese entrance into India's strategic spaces, India began to establish relationships with the great powers, but also with smaller states such as Vietnam. Specifically, Brewster has identified both reactive dynamics in Indian strategic thinking as well as an active strand related to India's ambitions to become a major power.¹²⁶

This shows that while India had ambitions prior to the Modi government when the LEP was in place, India was more constrained then than now. This explains why India was more cautious then, but under the Modi government, India's ambitions have grown. Therefore, while the Indian navy also entered Southeast Asian waters prior to 2014; the Act East Policy is likely to have been to have contributed significantly to India's increasingly engagement with the region, including Vietnam, while a prerequisite for the AEP has been a growth in Indian power, but also other factors such as elite consensus, and Modi government's policy responses.

In summary, the first hypothesis does provide a satisfactory explanation to the research question, because the AEP seems to be an important reason for why India engages Vietnam. Based on the empirical evidence, this hypothesis holds true.

H2: India emphasises Vietnam as a resource to utilise because India feels under pressure from China and therefore looks for support.

For the second hypothesis to be true, then China must have a clear presence in the India-Vietnam relationship. Indeed, this is the case, and here below will be explained why.

First, the analytical chapter has attempted to demonstrate that not only does China engage India's immediate neighbourhood considerably, which according to a realist analysis would be viewed as an obstacle to Indian national interests. India's aim to counter China makes sense from a realist perspective, because it is a power-oriented paradigm, and the more power India holds the greater chance it has to "win". From a realist perspective, China feels the same, and while India's power by most measurements is currently significantly less than that of China's, e.g. economically, then China does not wish to see India aligning with states it

¹²⁶ David Brewster, "Indian Strategic Thinking about East Asia." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 6 (2011): 825–52, <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1080/01402390.2011.627155>

mistrusts, such as the US or Japan, but nor would this make sense from a realist viewpoint that China should cherish India's relationship with a lesser power, Vietnam, given the fact that rivalry exists between India and China.

The India-China dynamics therefore does play a role in the India-Vietnam relationship. India does look for support for its aims from a diverse set of states including Vietnam.

As Don McLain Gill notes, India is a democratic state which respects state diversity, and thus understands that states can have various ideological sensitivities. India's stance allows Vietnam to be more in harmony with its own interests and security orientations, which are often separate from those of the US-led bloc.¹²⁷ This witness of realist elements to India's foreign policy, because India seeks to strengthen its relations with diverse states whose ideologies or cultures might not correspond with that of its own.

A realist might argue that the cultural aspect of India's relationship with Vietnam is far less relevant to its foreign policy than is India's aim to strengthen its Vietnam policy as a result of India's understanding of systemic factors, of which China is important. This is because India and China compete in many places, which in part is due to an increase in both states' relative power, which is why it has become possible for China, but also to some extent for India, to upgrade the military and infrastructure etc to become more powerful. Naturally, for India to strengthen its relationship with Vietnam by sending its naval vessels to Vietnam from time to time to project its power requires state power, and the better India can utilise this, the more it can strengthen its Vietnam policy.

In summary, the second hypothesis also holds true. This means that both hypotheses have been confirmed, although in the social sciences a validation does not hold the same value as in the natural sciences.

The answer to the research question therefore is that the reason why the Narendra Modi government emphasises Vietnam as a resource to utilise is because India implemented its Act East Policy and that India feels under pressure from China and looks for support. Moreover, this also means that the argument of this study can be said to be true.

¹²⁷ Don McLain Gill, "Locating the Evolving Vietnam-India Security Partnership in Hanoi's Hedging Strategy with Major Powers: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis," *Millennial Asia* (Nov, 2023): , <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1177/09763996231211510>

5.3 Reflections on Theory and Research Design

In a neoclassical realist study of India's foreign policy, the analysis centers on key concepts such as power and security, where realism is capable of clarifying many aspects India's engagement with Vietnam. Yet, while neoclassical realists can employ ideational variables, their explanatory power might be greater than neoclassical realists admit.

Yet for one neoclassical realist scholar, Gustav Meibauer, history should play a greater role in NCR studies. He claims that history informs the perceptions of governments, and that history conceptualised can help explain why states view rising powers as threats in some cases, but not in others. For Meibauer, this is due to historical experiences such as cooperation or war, which impact states' foreign policies.¹²⁸

To place Meibauer's argument into the context of this study, one might ask whether non-material factors such as history should have been given greater explanatory power in relation to India's foreign policy with Vietnam. During research into speeches and source material released by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, one comes across many references to non-material factors. To provide an example: In 2022, Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar participated in the 50 year anniversary celebration of diplomatic relations between India and Vietnam. While Jaishankar affirmed Vietnam's importance for India's AEP, its Indo-Pacific Vision. Jaishankar also referred to the two states' shared historic experience with colonialism and independence struggles, while also emphasising shared aspects of both states' ancient civilizations.¹²⁹

Supposedly that the shared experience of independence struggles play a larger role in foreign policies than NCR's material ontology would accept, it would still be challenging to provide definite evidence for the role of history in contemporary Indian foreign policy toward Vietnam.

¹²⁸ Gustav Meibauer, "Neorealism, neoclassical realism and the problem(s) of history," *International Relations* 37, no.2 (2023): 348-369, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178211033943>

¹²⁹ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "Remarks by External Affairs Minister, Dr.S. Jaishankar at the celebration of 50th Anniversary of India-Vietnam Diplomatic Relations," June 17,2022, accessed May 29, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/35421/Remarks_by_External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_at_the_celebration_of_50th_Anniversary_of_IndiaVietnam_Diplomatic_Relations

Research Design

In hindsight, the use of hypotheses result in less flexibility, while decisively proving India's Act East Policy or China's role in India's Vietnam policy is almost impossible. Still, the use of the case study method in neoclassical realist studies seems promising. This is regardless of whether or not history should be included, for instance in an eclectic approach.

There has however, been an important limitation to this single case study, and that is the time frame, which has resulted in the omission of the pre-Modi government period. While a longer time period would have meant a less detailed study, a comparative study of India's foreign policy toward Vietnam under the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi administrations could have been important in relation to change and continuity in Indian foreign policy toward Vietnam. True, this study has discussed continuity and change in Indian foreign policy; however this has been done so ad-hoc rather than providing a systematic analysis, which would require the selection of the comparative study method. This is because otherwise one cannot justify a thorough analysis of a previous administration within the frame of the selected research question.

In summary, this single case study has yielded the expected results in relation to why India engages Vietnam today, while a greater inclusion of India's Look East Policy's role in the bilateral relationship would have required a longer time frame.

5.4 Further Study

The preceding section raised the question of whether the role of non-material factors such as history might be a more important factor in the India's relationship with Vietnam than this realist study has granted it in terms of explanatory power.

On the other hand, to provide a different perspective to this study, it could be relevant to examine the bilateral relations through the lens of constructivism. This is because the constructivist IR approach is more likely to take notice of political statements based on culture or history, rather than minimising their causal impact on foreign policy.

David M. McCourt suggests that the very nature of constructivism's approach to IR differs from other approaches. Realism, he argues, examines the effects of power, but constructivism is a process which examines the process of doing, and it draws on several other areas outside

of IR, such as sociology, social theory, the cognate field etc. Furthermore he argues that constructivism opposes essentialism, and sees the features of international political life as *constructed*.¹³⁰

Indeed, such an approach would allow for a more thorough consideration of factors in India's foreign policy related to the cognate area such as historical memory. Since China has also been an important aspect of this study, a constructivist is likely more so than a realist to take China's historical memory into consideration, whether this relate to the time of Japanese occupation, or the time of the former British colonial era's systemic as well as real constraint on China at a time when China was weak and not capable of defending all of its territory. Therefore, while a neorealist is likely to reject the impact of historical threats from several states against by China, on its current foreign policy, a neoclassical realist might moderately consider few of these claims, while for a constructivist; this could perhaps help explain China's current threat perception of the international system.

¹³⁰ David M. McCourt, *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory* (Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2022), 1-2.

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