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### ASEAN AND CHINA IN VIETNAM'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE REGION

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#### **ABSTRACT:**

National security is one of the most critical challenges for the society, economy and political system of a given country, especially, for its own stability, sustainability and prosperity. It is unconditionally the top priority for ASEAN nations that have to cope with the rising China in all aspects in the Asia-Pacific region. This article is using case study and comparative empirical analysis to examine the impact of ASEAN-China strategic imbalance on Vietnam's national security. In the 21st century, economic as well as geo-political relations between China and ASEAN have made positive changes. However, this relationship still shows many difficulties and obstacles that the two sides need to solve and overcome to benefit from potential of each other. The first aim of this article is to focus on overall complex but imbalanced relationship between ASEAN and China that could pose real threats to ASEAN nations including Vietnam in terms of its inability to counterbalance the increasingly assertive China in the region. The second aim of the article is to propose some viable solutions to guard the safety of the people, the security of the society and the political existence of Vietnam.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The end of the Cold War has opened up a vast space for peace and development for each nation regardless of being diminutive or a powerhouse. The main trend of humanity in solving conflicts and disputes is through friendly dialogue and cooperation, not military confrontation. Economic and political power is the most important measure of strength for each nation [17].

The establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) has facilitated bilateral economic, trade and investment flows to spur the economic growth [50]. AEC will promote the ASEAN integration in political, economic and cultural aspects, which is conducive to the formation of common market and joint production base in the region [67]. AEC will boost free flow of goods, services, capital and human resources to accelerate ASEAN's economic growth. China's economy has grown rapidly since economic reform and 1979 open door policy [11, 12, 13]. In 2001, the entry to the WTO marked another stage of China's economic reform and opening, improving its economic efficiency and business competitiveness. China's economic scale and growth in addition to WTO accession are having significant effect on ASEAN economies and beyond. ASEAN nations perceive threats that arise from China's ability to enter their market with constantly growing range of manufacturers. China's cost competitiveness can undermine ASEAN's position in the main world markets and threaten domestic market of all its industries. Moreover, together with rapidly growing domestic market China may divert FDI flows from ASEAN [60, 61].

At the beginning of 50th anniversary of ASEAN's founding, relationship between China and ASEAN had grown into a strongest and most vibrant partnership in the world, in which economic, trade and investment relations are constantly growing [6]. ASEAN has become geopolitical space as well as China's major economic counterpart. China-ASEAN FDI flows started from low level but took place strongly. ASEAN increasingly becomes major FDI destination for Chinese enterprises with rising number and scale of investment projects and industrial parks, shifting from traditional manufacture processing to new areas of services such as currency trading, e-commerce, cultural exchange and entertainment. ASEAN is China's third largest trading partner, while China is the first country to establish free trade agreement (FTA) with ASEAN and has been its largest trading partner since 2009. China and ASEAN promote mutually beneficial economic cooperation, establishing strategic partnership as a platform for economic, trade and investment cooperation, making this relationship one of the most successful cooperation models in the world [17].

Along with advantages brought about by general context and dynamic economic development, in the political and security landscape there are found many uncertainties. In this sense, China-ASEAN relationship still faces difficulties, especially the disagreement between China and some of ASEAN countries in the South China Sea. The trade deficit of ASEAN countries with China continues to increase. The economic cooperation, although developing rapidly since the Cold War, will be unsustainable if not being based on political security to address key challenges in this partnership. The situation is extremely dangerous as China is continually increasing its military capability and political assertiveness to preserve its national interest and security worldwide [5, 14].

Regarding the wide spectrum of complex relationship between ASEAN and China, the first aim of this article is to focus on overall impact in terms real threat and danger for Vietnam due to its inability to counterbalance on its own

the rising China in the region. The second aim of this article is to propose some viable solutions to guard the safety of the people, security of the society and political existence of Vietnam as an ASEAN member state.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Security And Related Terms*

Most contemporary dictionaries define security as a state of certainty in opposition to a crisis situation. In the UNESCO's Dictionary of Social Sciences, security is virtually identical with certainty (safety) and it means no physical threat (danger) or full protection against it [15]. Security is supreme and also basic need of people and social groups [44]. Humans always aim to satisfy their most important security goals that are need of survival, stability, sustainability and predictability of development, well-being and finally happiness. Security can be defined not only as specific goals, but also as a succession. This means that we are not aware of what security is until we have lost it [33]. Security could also be seen as a process because it is not a state of affairs but rather a continuous social progress in which operating entities try to improve mechanisms ensuring their sense of security. All components of this process, dependent and independent variables, are subject to numerous changes conditioned by the internal and external (international) situation of a nation [20, 27]. Security and safety point to events and activities that embody danger for humans and their environment. The main difference between them is the deliberateness (intentionality) of created danger. In case of security, created danger is intentional and recognized as consequence of planned behavior. Contrariwise, situations where circumstances contribute to unwanted consequence are classified as safety [64]. As mentioned above, security is presented as the ability to survive, independence, identity or certainty of development. In security analyses, there are two opposite terms to consider: challenge (negative term) and threat (positive term). Challenges are understood as the emergence of new situations where there are inalienable needs requiring formulation of responses and taking appropriate measures to ensure the security. Challenges can turn into threats to security. Threats can be a reflection of the real state of affairs or exaggerated ideas. Thus, they may refer to the assessment at a specific moment (real threat) or they may be extrapolation of anticipated developments and accompanying adverse changes (potential threats) [40].

### *National Security*

National security can be the most appropriately defined as its ability to protect its internal values against external threats. The state of security only occurs when there is no real threat (objective factor) and no potential of threat (subjective factor) to the nation [21]. Ensuring adequate level of national security is the responsibility of government and each country has its own national security (management) system and strategy [22, 25, 38, 16]. The proper functioning of national security system that includes law enforcement services, training and research institutes, rescue services responsible for security and government bodies involved in such activities, depends largely on their interdependency and proper exchange of information [31, 16]. National security

closely relates to international security, which can be considered both at the regional and global level. United Nations have defined international security as a state in which nations believe that they are not threatened by military attack, pressure or economic compulsion (sanction), and are therefore capable of free development and progress. International security is the result and sum of security of all countries, the international community. Thus, international security cannot be reached without full international cooperation [1].

### *Security Issues Classification*

Security issues in literature and practice are mostly presented as multidimensional problems of multiple levels [23]. Security issues should not be confined to economic, social and environmental aspects and their interaction [28]. Additionally, security research is generally presented as a twofold problem. The first level is focused on individuals and social groups while the second level deals with issues of national security. Furthermore, researchers are very often concentrated on life or health threat directly related to the conventional war conflicts, terrorism, organized crime, political or social persecution and natural disasters. Nevertheless, such security understanding does not fit the present reality. The human security in a broad sense could be jeopardized also by unfair economic and social practices or abuse of political power by governmental bodies, corruption scandals, discrimination of minorities, race and sex, drugs trafficking and black markets [23]. Over the last decades, the understanding of security has been continually changing. Breaches of cyber security, separatist attacks or intense cyber wars are becoming more usual and more likely to happen than conventional wars. Violations of cyber security may cause great damage, ruin businesses or even temporarily paralyze countries or regions [45, 48]. Many scientific papers are empirically investigating security issues typical for the economic and military powerhouses. Those security issues are classified into the two aforementioned groups: conventional and unconventional. In contemporary world, we are observing the rise of unconventional security issues. Their scope and range need to be paid more attention. Nonetheless, it doesn't mean that the conventional security issues are becoming less influential. The division of security issues into another category: internal and external, seems to be convincing as we are observing both the rise of internal security issues, their frequency and intensity and the external security issues originating from outside as a result of a political game of superpowers in the region and worldwide.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The security science is seen as much broader than the military science as it includes also non-military issues of different levels (international, regional, supranational, national, and individual). Security science is an independent and original research discipline that strives to obtain a comprehensive, coherent panorama of the reality from point of view of satisfying individual and collective need for security. The development of methodology of security science is just both separate and, as well, being at the intersection of other well rounded disciplines, such as political science, philosophy, anthropology, psychology or sociology, etc. Security science in the classification of sciences is a discipline that belongs to the field of social sciences. Moreover, due to the

specific objects, subjects and methods of research, and also due to the type of research statements security science is considered as an interdisciplinary science. We are assuming a fairly obvious statement that scientific methods appropriate for security science are, amongst those very popular in the social sciences, methods of empirical research and comparative analysis. These methods involve verification of hypotheses or searching for answers to research questions formulated by scholars [26, 46, 47, 49].

Having the above methodology issues in mind, in this article we relate to current and future ASEAN-China strategic imbalance to draw comprehensive implications and propose viable solutions ensuring safety of the people, security of the society and political existence of ASEAN in general and Vietnam in particular, additionally contributing to the global security regional stability. We conducted comparative studies between ASEAN and China based on sound theoretical framework encompassing selected security issues in the respect of two interrelated dimensions [3, 17]: *macroeconomic security* (including mainly foreign trade and investment relations imbalance) and *geopolitical security* (including military spending, unity and political identity imbalance). These security issues always come together, strictly determine each other and, of course, will certainly pose many challenges for ASEAN being in an underdog position to China [52, 53, 54]. Consequently, if those security issues are not dealt properly they could hinder the whole process of integration, consolidation and development of ASEAN to deal with rising and assertive China in a pursuit and defense of its core national interests. Those security issues, both in macroeconomic and geopolitical terms are the basis for ASEAN-China comparative study to find out disadvantages of ASEAN in relation to China in each of aspects of security issues. The study collected data related with ASEAN, China and Vietnam's military spending, the in- and outflows of ODA and FDI, import and export. Secondary data were collected from credible Internet sources for the period 2010-2018 to serve, as an additional evidence for China's dominance in each of aspects of comparison and ASEAN-China strategic imbalance. The result of comparative study is served to find out an answer to the question exposed in the article's title: "How ASEAN-China strategic imbalance impacts Vietnam's national security?". Many issues related to ASEAN-China strategic imbalance are identified (see further in Table 6).

## ***Research Results and Discussion***

### ***Case 1. ASEAN-China Economic Imbalance***

Macroeconomic security issues are associated with sustainable economic growth and regional trade and investment relations between China and ASEAN. Here are some of the latest developments giving strong evidence to the increasing ASEAN-China economic imbalance to the disadvantage of ASEAN (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Macroeconomic security issues and landmarks in the China-ASEAN relationship

<b>Time</b>	<b>Landmarks</b>
2012 and on.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Banana dispute between Philippines and China resulting in China's ban on banana imports from Philippines due to quarantine safety standards concerns.</li> <li>-Both Thailand's tourism industry and Indonesia's fishing industry have been battered by China's actions.</li> <li>-China's rising investment in developing Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Malaysia's infrastructure.</li> </ul>
2005-2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-ASEAN-China's trade volume has tripled over this period.</li> <li>-Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia had high trade deficit with China.</li> <li>-China is key export market for Laos and Myanmar.</li> </ul>
2015-2018.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-China's FDI is predominant for Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar.</li> </ul>
2015-2018.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Since the CAFTA signed in 2010, China-ASEAN trade volume has grown with an average annual rate of almost 20%.</li> <li>-China's economic slow-down started in 2018 has badly impacted Thailand, Malaysia and Philippines.</li> </ul>
2015-2018.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-China's FDI is rising significantly in all ASEAN countries due to One Belt and One Road (OBOR) initiative.</li> </ul>
2018.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Trade war started between the US and China.</li> <li>-ASEAN countries to regain trade balance and economic growth momentum compared with China.</li> </ul>
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-All-out (in all possible fronts) war between the US and China.</li> <li>-Covid-19 outbreak impacting macroeconomic security issues of both China, ASEAN and the world.</li> <li>-ASEAN countries to regain trade balance and economic growth momentum compared with China.</li> </ul>

**Source:** Author's

There is a real concern that ASEAN is increasingly reliant on China as Chinese trade and investment influence is spreading rapidly [17, 52]. For example, Philippines' banana export to China has been banned in 2012 due to quarantine safety standards. The ban was lifted later only after Duterte's decision to take friendlier stance towards Beijing. This is because Philippines is benefiting from China's economic growth due to the huge and potential market. However, knowing that, China can use economic power to achieve its political interests. In fact, all sectors of ASEAN economy are depending too much on the outside. Thus, they are especially vulnerable due to China's erratic behavior both in the market and in the political scene. China can easily hinder industries of other nations using its predominant position and influence in the region [37]. Malaysia' National League Party has expressed concern after Prime Minister Najib Razak's 34 billion USD economic deal sealed during his visit to Beijing. The deal would not only pave the way for massive national debt, but also for

China to exert influence on internal affairs of Malaysia. The 7 billion USD valued China-Thailand high-speed railway project through Laos is also less welcomed due to China's too excessive demands as well as overly high lending rates. This is one of the infrastructure projects serving China's expansion policy in ASEAN, specifically to increase the influence of China in Laos [9]. The 10 billion USD valued China-Myanmar pipeline project has sparked social protests as it threatened the local environment and households were not satisfactorily compensated due to relocation process [10]. Greater economic reliance on China is another concern for ASEAN countries with weak economic fundamentals: Indonesia and Philippines' stagnating consumption growth; slowing down FDI flows to Indonesia; Thai currency's appreciation exerting high pressure on export. China and some ASEAN countries are now trying to resolve disputes over maritime rights. Undoubtedly, China can use economic leverage to promote solutions that serve its national interests in the South China Sea and beyond [17]. In another front, China can also use infrastructure that they built in ASEAN countries for the same purpose [7, 17].

ASEAN-China's trade volume has tripled over period 2005-2015. That is higher than the increase in intra-ASEAN and ASEAN-Korea trade volume. The contribution of developed world in ASEAN's total trade volume has been declining, while contribution of China is increasing. China and ASEAN economies are interdependent and interconnected within a network of production and logistics systems. Except Singapore, all the ASEAN economies had very high trade deficit with China during the period 2008-2015. China is an important destination for ASEAN's exports and imports to serve the needs of production and consumption. No other trading partner than China has such an important position for most of the exports and imports of ASEAN economies. However, China is benefiting more from access to ASEAN market rather than the opposite. Since the CAFTA signed in 2010, China-ASEAN trade volume has grown rapidly, with an annual rate of 20%. In 2016, ASEAN welcomed 18.61 million (17% of the total number) Chinese tourists [62]. The importance of China in entire ASEAN trade and service activities is rising. Particularly, in this period, Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia, with growing trade deficit with China, are heavily dependent on China for imported goods and raw materials. In 2013, Vietnam's trade deficit with China was more than 23 billion USD; in 2014 it was nearly 29 billion USD; in 2015 it was more than 33 billion USD.

After this period, in 2016 and 2017 it has dropped to over 28 billion USD and over 22.7 billion USD respectively [63]. China is a key export market for Laos and Myanmar. China dominates ASEAN's trade exchange being largest trading partner with all countries and ASEAN as a whole. For China, ASEAN is the third largest trading partner [18]. Thus, ASEAN's trade dependence on China is high compared to other trading partners. Being in such comfortable and advantageous position, China is likely to push up their political agenda, such as the maritime claims or the pressure on each of ASEAN states to keep distance from the US in an exchange for trade and economic benefits. For the less influential countries in ASEAN such as Cambodia and Laos, China treats them as cordial friends and leverages relationship with them to influence regional policies as it has ever done so far. In the FDI front, the importance of China is still modest. China's FDI is only important for the less developed countries such

as Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. However, Chinese FDI in ASEAN is rising over time because of its fast growing market and younger population. ASEAN's developing countries need FDI to offset their trade deficit and develop own infrastructure. China's rising FDI in ASEAN is also due to OBOR initiative [8]. The 2015 GDP slowdown of ASEAN countries, such as Thailand, Philippines and Malaysia testified the fact that they were experiencing a sharp export drop due to China's economic slowdown to single digit rate. Thus, the surge of trade exchange volume between China and ASEAN was depending on China's economic situation that hasn't been so strong in this volatile period. In terms of FDI in ASEAN, focusing interests on other regions and continents, China will not compete with the US and other regional economic powerhouses such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Australia [24]. Table 2 and 3 present ASEAN-China mutual FDI and ODA, mutual import and export volume in the period 2010-2018.

**Table 2.** ASEAN-China FDI and ODA flows in 2010-2018 (in billion USD)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<b>FDI from ASEAN to China</b>	12,5	11,1	8,6	7,3	7,1	11,6	7,8	11,3	12,4
<b>FDI from China to ASEAN</b>	9,8	10,2	12,0	12,4	12,8	12,3	13,9	14,1	15,3
<b>ODA from ASEAN to China</b>	1,3	1,32	1,5	1,5	1,7	2,3	2,3	2,7	3,2
<b>ODA from China to ASEAN</b>	2,36	3,13	4,55	4,66	5,20	5,12	5,34	6,14	6,26

**Source:** Author's synthesis from UNCOMTRADE<sup>1</sup> and China Customs<sup>2</sup> report

<sup>1</sup> <https://comtrade.un.org/>

<sup>2</sup> [english.customs.gov.cn/](http://english.customs.gov.cn/)

**Table 3.** ASEAN-China import and export in 2010-2018 (in billion USD)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<b>ASEAN's export to China</b>	124,45	170,08	204,2	244,04	272,05	197,24	256,1	279,1	282,1
<b>China's export to ASEAN</b>	117,7	225,12	320,9	403,6	437,15	448,7	468,12	513,6	625,4
<b>ASEAN's import from China</b>	138,56	192,77	195,821	199,56	208,21	143,13	196,4	235,7	265,14
<b>China's import from ASEAN</b>	10,55	200	38,7	40,1	42,85	22,4	43,4	48,61	14,58

**Source:** Author's synthesis from UNCOMTRADE<sup>3</sup> and China Customs<sup>4</sup> report

The current US-China trade war also impacts China-ASEAN relationship and macroeconomic stability of ASEAN. The fact that US imports less from China means it will import more from other parts of the world, including ASEAN. Similarly, China will import more, among others, from Vietnam to fill the gap of reduced import from US due to tensions over trade tariff and protection under the Donald Trump's administration. Thus, ASEAN countries could improve their trade balance to close their growth gap with the two world economic powerhouses. In fact, in 2018, Vietnam officially overtook China in terms of GDP growth. The Covid-19 pandemic outbreak has wiped out all economic growth achievements of almost countries in the world, bringing their growth rate significantly under 0 percent. Due to being among countries least affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in the world, this is the second chance for Vietnam to reduce strategic economic imbalance with China that has been continually widening over last three decades.

### *Case 2. ASEAN-China Non-Economic Imbalance*

The political security and national defense issues are related with maritime disputes in the South China Sea between China and part of ASEAN and the potential involvement of US and its allies in the region [55, 56, 57]. For both sides, these are external threats that might turn into real dangers. China and ASEAN are committed to maintain peaceful and stable environment, because

<sup>3</sup> <https://comtrade.un.org/>

<sup>4</sup> [english.customs.gov.cn/](http://english.customs.gov.cn/)

they know exactly that possible all-out war will wipe out all the socio-economic achievements made within the past 30 years. China's threat to ASEAN countries still exists, as China is constantly rising in its assertiveness over activities related to sovereignty disputes, building artificial islands in the South China Sea, boosting defense spending to upgrade military capability (see Table 4). All of that caused deep concern for countries in the region as well as the international community [39].

**Table 4.** China, ASEAN and Vietnam national defense spending (2010-2018) (in billion USD)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<b>China</b>	85,1	89,2	99,6	121,4	120,1	135	143,6	167,5	250
<b>ASEAN</b>	21,4	25,5	26,9	29,1	33,1	35,5	44,8	43,1	56,6
<b>Vietnam</b>	3,1	3,4	4	4,2	4,3	4,4	5	4,9	5,5

**Source:** AFP<sup>5</sup> (Agence France Presse) and SIPRI<sup>6</sup> (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute)

ASEAN is the most sensitive region in the world, being situated at the center of Asia-Pacific. With ASEAN's support, Myanmar has peacefully transformed from military regime to a democratic country. In a long-term, ASEAN is progressing towards preserving its interests that are prosperity and stability in the region. Politically, ASEAN is the only credible platform for small countries to maintain their geopolitical advantage in the region. However, ASEAN is now facing serious challenges related with its own political unity as the maritime disputes in South China Sea created deep divisions within, between countries directly involved in and countries that have nothing in common. Internally, social tensions and disputes within in some of ASEAN member states, such as Malaysia and Thailand, are becoming increasingly chaotic and intense [32, 34].

Competition between the US and China and the US' rebalancing strategy in Asia Pacific has created risks of decohesion to ASEAN. Both the two superpowers are trying to draw ASEAN towards themselves, persuading and threatening each of its member states. Both of them are increasingly involved in the South East Asia, pulling ASEAN countries in their geopolitical orientations. Sino-US competition puts ASEAN ahead of challenge to dealing with external pressures [29, 66, 42].

Since 1967, ASEAN has grown and become an important factor in maintaining and retaining stability and security in the region. ASEAN's role is to reconnect and reconcile conflicts, promote cooperation for peace, stability and development [29]. ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), one of three pillars of ASEAN Community, is tasked to elevate political and security

<sup>5</sup> [www.afp.com](http://www.afp.com)

<sup>6</sup> [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org)

cooperation to a new height, with the participation of all possible external partners, to ensure that ASEAN member states coexist peacefully within and with countries in the region in an environment of justice, democracy and harmony. The APSC is to promote a comprehensive approach to security, including political, economic, cultural-social and environmental aspects; strengthen political and diplomatic cooperation, by developing common standards of conduct; avoid using military forces and resolve all disputes by peaceful means; retain open relations with external partners and maintain ASEAN's central role in the regional architecture [65]. The XVIII Congress of China Communist Party in March 2013 officially brought the issue of maritime development into national defense strategy, emphasizing the building of maritime power as an indispensable choice to protect national interests and restore the Chinese nation. In fact, China continues to materialize its monopoly position in the region [36]. Xi Jin Ping's ambitions have led China from being a hidden dragon to being deeply engaged and over-stretched abroad, from East China Sea to remote Western locations. [4].

On the issues of South China Sea, ASEAN continually: reaffirms the importance of peace, stability, security, safety, freedom of aerial and maritime navigation; respects the rule of law to resolve disputes by peaceful means; restrains and not to complicate the disputes; implements fully and effectively the DOC (Declaration on the Conduct in the South China Sea) and reaches the COC (Code of Conduct in the South China Sea). The outcome of ASEAN-China politic and security collaboration in 1997-2003 period is a signed Joint Statement towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In November 2002, they signed the DOC, Joint Declaration on China-ASEAN's security, pledged to settle all disputes by peaceful means, laying an important legal basis for the implementation of cooperation in the South China Sea. In 2003, the two sides issued the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnerships, opening up a period of comprehensive development across all industries. In Bali 2003, China is the first major country outside the region to sign Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN as a premise to ensure the security environment of the region. On August 06, 2017, in Manila, the adopted and negotiated COC framework between the two sides was officially launched. Despite established strategic partnership with China, ASEAN countries are still concerned about Chinese threat to their national security. However, at the same time they regard China's economic rise as an opportunity for all [30]. Those important landmark events are listed in the Table 5.

### *Discussion on evidence of ASEAN-China strategic imbalance*

ASEAN is now at the cross-road position between China and US influence. China and the US are increasingly engaged in ASEAN internal issues, involving each of ASEAN states in their geopolitical power. Sino-US competition puts ASEAN ahead of challenge of dealing with external pressures [29, 42]. ASEAN is situated in an increasingly vulnerable position due to changed regional balance of power. ASEAN is divided into pro-US and pro-China camps.

**Table 5.** Main political security issues and landmarks in the China-ASEAN relationship

<b>Time and place</b>	<b>Landmarks</b>
China-ASEAN summit. 2000.	-Joint Statement towards the 21 <sup>st</sup> century.
November 2002.	-Declaration on the Conduct of parties in the South China Sea (DOC), a joint declaration on mutual security, pledge to settle disputes by peaceful means
2003.	-Joint declaration on Strategic Partnerships, opening up a period of comprehensive development. -Treaty of Amity and Cooperation to create important premise to ensure the security environment of the region.
August 06 2017, Manila.	COC framework between ASEAN and China was officially launched.

**Source:** Author's

China's influence in the region is on the rise, with its economic strength and geopolitical implications. In the South China Sea, China built and militarized islands, procuring missiles, submarines and fighters. China set out important strategic objectives in the South China Sea not only as a matter of territorial sovereignty, but for the purpose of gaining access to maritime resources. ASEAN had multiple, both multilateral and bilateral consultations on the South China Sea issues, but there seemed to be no specific solution at all. [19]. In the context of China's continual growth and expansion, Xi Jin Ping's OBOR (One Belt and One Road) initiative, a clear power imbalance over the South China Sea region is emerged. Due to the limited capacity in all means, ASEAN is relatively passive or even rather avoids counterbalancing China [34]. Cooperation and mutual understanding should be in place of counterbalancing each other [43, 35]. In the following Table 6 several aspects related with above mentioned strategic imbalance are recorded to provide in-depth analysis of their impact from point of view of Vietnam's national interest and security strategy.

### ***Consequence and solutions for Vietnam's national security in the region***

Vietnam's trade volume and structure depend too much on Chinese market as the biggest Vietnam's trading partner. This is very dangerous situation when China's foreign trade policy is erratic and Chinese enterprises' behavior becomes inconsistent. Moreover, China's economy is slowing down. Vietnam foreign policy including foreign trade policy should be more diversified to avoid being surprised by unpredictable behaviors of partners due to any subjective or objective reason. However, due to geographical proximity and the fact that Chinese exported goods respond in many ways to the needs of Vietnam the trend of dependence is set to continue over the next few years. Vietnam's dependence on China in all aspect of traded goods will impact its annual trade deficit.

**Table 6.** List of issues related of ASEAN-China strategic imbalance

	<b>Macroeconomic issues of strategic imbalance</b>	<b>Geopolitical aspects of strategic imbalance</b>
1	<b>M1.</b> ASEAN's foreign trade depends too much on Chinese market as China is biggest trading partner	<b>G1.</b> ASEAN's lack of political unity to offer common stance toward China
2	<b>M2.</b> Rising trade deficit with China in some of ASEAN's countries	<b>G2.</b> Most of ASEAN nations suffer internal instability and social tension
3	<b>M3.</b> China's economy is slowing down and could slow down further in the next decades	<b>G3.</b> a) ASEAN's military spending cannot compete with that of China b) ASEAN's military spending per capita is also disproportionate compared to China
4	<b>M4.</b> Political influence by Chinese FDI in some of ASEAN's countries could spread to others	<b>G4.</b> External pressure due to ongoing Sino-US geopolitical competition
5		<b>G5.</b> China's aggressive stance toward common security issues in the region

**Source:** Author's

In the future, Vietnam should improve quality and structure of exported goods to tap more to the tough developed markets such as US, EU and Japan, reducing the dependence on China's market. China's growth slow-down is a particular signal for Vietnam to do so, especially this growth rate it is forecasted to be below 5% beyond 2020 and in reality it is far below this threshold due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the future, Chinese market will become less attractive and very competitive for Vietnamese goods and services. In addition, presently Vietnam could make a use of ongoing trade war and also war in other fronts between the US and China to improve its odds. As a war consequence, both economic powerhouses will find the way to the rival's market, among others, through ASEAN, especially Vietnam. That will lead to the increase of Vietnam's trade volume, reducing trading deficit, dependence on China and the scale of current strategic economic imbalance. Vietnam should further promote trade exchange with both superpowers and serve as an alternative market for Chinese and US goods and services [58, 59].

China's FDI inflows are abundant in some least developed ASEAN countries while they are very modest in some others. The largest FDI streams to Vietnam are coming in from Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Chinese Taiwan. As a matter of fact, FDI is accompanied by security and political influence of the investors on receivers. Under this respect, China's FDI is less welcomed in Vietnam. In other respects, Chinese FDI is also considered as less attractive in terms of quality and implementation conditions than those offered by Japanese, Korean, Singaporean and Taiwanese enterprises. However, Vietnam should

promote to attract more Chinese FDI projects that are of good quality in order to reduce this strategic FDI imbalance. In fact, the scale of Chinese investment activities is disproportionate to the scale of Chinese trading activities with Vietnam. Vietnam should call for more and carefully select important Chinese FDI projects to promote long term, well-balanced Chinese economic activities in Vietnam. From China's side, China will also pay more attention and interests to Vietnam's investment environment as pay gap between two countries is widening and the Sino-US trade war is making Chinese enterprise moving their production activities abroad to avoid trade tariff posed on made-in-China products.

In contrast to coherent China, ASEAN shows no political unity to offer common stance in maritime and islands disputes with China in South China Sea. Without solidarity and unity in ASEAN, no single country can fight for its own national interest and security. Each ASEAN country has its own interest and specific relation with China so it is almost impossible to reach common stance in the disputes over South China Sea issues [41]. Thus, Vietnam should base on its own internal strength, call on spirit of national solidarity and patriotism of Vietnamese people during previous war in the past against American imperialism and French colonialism. History will be a solid evidence that Vietnam will not concede China or any other superpower over the issues of sovereignty of disputed islands in the South China Sea.

The second ASEAN-China geopolitical imbalance consists in both ASEAN and Vietnam's military spending that is incomparable with that of China. ASEAN's military spending per capita compared to China is also disproportionate. Chinese population is twice as large as the ASEAN population. China's military spending per capita is 4-5 times larger than that of ASEAN over the period of 2010-2018. Vietnam is about one fifth of ASEAN in terms of territory and population, but one tenth in terms of military spending throughout this period (Table 4). With strategic geopolitical position, having a vast border with China in the North and South China Sea in the East, having been involved in multiple conflicts with China in history, Vietnam is facing many security challenges from China than any country in ASEAN. As consequence, Vietnam should boost military spending to cope with rising regional security challenges in the context of its neighbors' increase of military spending over last decade.

Due to the lack of political unity and solidarity, ASEAN cannot act independently in the international security arena. As such, ASEAN cannot be a counterbalance for both China and the US in the regional geopolitical competition. Knowing that, both China and US are trying different arsenal of methods to persuade each of ASEAN members to stay on their side. That simply leads to the split and possible break-up of ASEAN. So far and in also the future, Vietnam keeps neutral stance, neither pro-China nor pro-US to execute its own independent foreign policy to secure national interest in relations with both China and the US.

The final ASEAN-China strategic imbalance is related with China's aggressive stance and provocative war rhetoric toward common regional security issues together with strongly developed and still developing military capability. In this

respect, ASEAN is incomparable to China so it is irrational to engage in direct war conflict with China. The all-out war conflict is also impossible due to the fact that China has many loyal friends in ASEAN (those receiving abundance of Chinese FDI and ODA support) who will certainly reject any kind of conflict. Hence, ASEAN's ways of resolving disputes are by peaceful means, through dialogue and negotiation, in accordance with international law. This dovish approach is promoted by Vietnam's government knowing through history that being in direct war conflict with China or any country in the world will only cause disasters to its own society and economy. However, Vietnam does not exclude and is ready to stand against possible war in case of being attacked by enemy. Vietnam has overcome many military conflicts with world superpowers in history. History has also shown that the power of a nation consists in national solidarity and commitment, not quantitative economic and military indicators [2].

### **CONCLUSION**

The article gives a full insight into complex essence and multiple definitions of national security. National security could be defined both by specific goals and regarded as a process conditioned by global, regional and local context, conditions and circumstances. The article, based on a sound and solid literature review of relevant, multiple sources of renown scientific journals, also presents general overview over security issues and related concepts, their multidimensional (socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-political, science and technology, diplomatic, military), multi-perspective (internal, external), multifaceted (conventional and unconventional) and multi-level (international, regional, supranational, national, social groups, families and individuals) character.

Regarding research methodology on security issues, the article proposed to inherit from diverse disciplines of social sciences. However, security science should preserve both its originality (to be distinctive and separated from other scientific disciplines) and multidisciplinary character (to be at the crossroad of well-rounded disciplines).

In terms of core concept of analysis, the strategic imbalance, the article proposed a research framework consisting of two most important dimensions of this term (macro-economic imbalance and geopolitical imbalance) for the need of conducting comparative security study, drawing consequences and proposing solutions regarding national security. Those are areas of basic importance for humans functioning as individuals or collective in contemporary integrating world. Security issues perceived by the lens of such dimensions always come together, determine each other and will pose a great challenge to overcome for ASEAN as a whole and/or as a group of nations.

The article attaches important role of national government in preserving national interest and security, at the same time protecting against all possible threats and dangers. In our study, the consequences of ASEAN-China strategic imbalanced have been in-depth discussed to propose feasible solutions for Vietnam's national government to preserve its socio-economic development and national security in the region.

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