MARITIME SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION IN THE FIRST TWO DECADES OF THE 21st CENTURY AND SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR VIETNAM

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Abstract: Maritime security has in recent times emerged as a burning issue in international relations in general and in the Indo-Pacific region in particular. The Indo-Pacific is located on the coasts of the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific Ocean and the waters connecting these two oceans, including countries in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and many countries in the Middle East and Africa. With topographical tectonics, this area includes numerous "choke points" on the maritime routes that have strategic significance for the development of international trade, playing an important role in oil transportation, gas and world goods from the Middle East to Australia and East Asia. Therefore, maritime security issues for the lifeblood of the world economy are a particular concern of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, including Vietnam. To address the research objectives, this study employs a combination of specialized methodologies, including the historical and logical methods, which serve as foundational approaches to examining the topic. Additionally, analytical tools commonly used in the field of international relations are applied to investigate the relevant issues. Based on an analysis of the maritime security landscape in the Indo-Pacific region during the first two decades of the 21st century, the study proposes several policy recommendations for Vietnam in the coming years.

Keywords. Maritime security, Indo-Pacific, the 21st century, Vietnam

1.   An overview of the Indo-Pacific region

In 1900, when delimiting the development eras, John Hay, who served as US Secretary of State from 1898 to 1905, chose the sea, not the continent, as the coordinate landmark. He commented: *"The Mediterranean is the ocean of the past, the Atlantic, the ocean of the present, and the Pacific, the ocean of the future"*[1]. More than a century has passed, John Hay's predictions have

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[1] Watters, R. F. & McGee, T. G. (1997). *Asia-Pacific: New Geographies of the Pacific Rim*. Victoria University Press, Wellington, p. 4

come true when the Pacific Ocean is becoming an area of great influence on the current international relations landscape. This prediction is even more valuable when the geopolitical competition space of the great powers expands and connects the Pacific Ocean with the Indian Ocean, creating the strategic region "Indo-Pacific".

Currently, the Indo-Pacific is emerging as an area with a very important position in the world geopolitical map. The geostrategic importance of the region is evident from the geo-spatiality factor including the countries located on the shores of the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific Ocean along with the seas that connect these two oceans. Its range is mainly considered to stretch from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of the United States. The region is a complex of many seas and coasts with diverse cultures, religions, ethnicities, governmental structures and economic models. In particular, the Indian Ocean is the area where most of the straits and waterways are important, with up to one-ninth of ports and one-fifth of the world's imports and exports. According to statistics, every year more than 100,000 vessels cross the Indian Ocean (2/3 oil tankers, 1/3 large cargo ships and 1/2 container ships in the world). Two-way international trade through the Indian Ocean reaches nearly 1 trillion USD/year[2]. The Indo-Pacific region has a strategically important position, focusing on the arterial maritime routes connecting the Pacific Ocean - Indian Ocean - Atlantic Ocean. This area contains a lot of potential for development, has oil and gas reserves, large mineral resources, biodiversity, and is home to more than half of the world's population. This region accounts for 40% of the total land area, 65% of the population (nearly 4.3 billion people), 63% of GDP and accounts for more than 50% of the world's maritime trade value[3].

Indo-Pacific is the geopolitical reality of Asia. It is a construct as well as a geography. Indo-Pacific has developed since 2007 to become the default description of contemporary geopolitics. Though there is no unanimous definition of Indo-Pacific yet, it can be described as primarily a maritime space. It is both a strategic as well as an economic domain comprising important sea lines of communication. It recognizes the economic, geopolitical, strategic and security connections between the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. It comprises important Sea Lanes of Communication that connect the littoral nations of both these oceans. So, the Indo-Pacific is also associated with maritime security and cooperation.

Thus, the integrated arena of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific has become a key theatre of maritime operations in the evolving geostrategic dynamic. As the world's economic power shifts from West to East, "Asia-Pacific", the once popular term to describe the thriving

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[2] Phạm Quang Minh & Nguyễn Thị Thùy Trang (2021). *Quan hệ quốc tế ở khu vực Ấn Độ Dương - Thái Bình Dương tự do và rộng mở* [International Relations in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Region]. World Publishers, Hanoi, p. 59

[3] Bhowmick, S. (2021). "The Indo-Pacific Economics: Inextricable Chinese linkages and Indian challenges". *https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-indo-pacific-economics-inextricable-chinese-linkages-and-indian-challenges/* (accessed on Mar 10, 2022).

economic and strategic environs of Asia, has been substituted by the more analyst-friendly "Indo-Pacific". The shift from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific is specifically to *"address apparent deficiencies in Asia's maritime security"*[4] and thus reconceptualising the geographic space as Indo-Pacific. The new construction depicts a vast geostrategic and geoeconomic realm spanning the western Pacific Ocean to the western Indian Ocean along the eastern coast of Africa and represents an integrated strategic entity, rather than as two diverse geographic and strategic theatres: the Indian Ocean Region and the Pacific. The Indo-Pacific places security and commerce at the centre of Asia's strategic template. The organic connection of the two oceans underlines the crucial role that the maritime environment plays in the region's economic and strategic dynamic.

2.   Maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region in the first two decades of the 21st century

The concept of maritime security was described by Geoffrey Till (British maritime thinker) as "good order at the sea"[5], where seaborne trade which contributes to many states logistic needs has to be protected from any kind of risks and threats. To Christian Bueger, maritime security extends beyond traditional dimensions[6]. Maritime security connects several issues through existing concepts of security, and adapts to emerging temporary issues. Bueger still considers the concept of seapower, especially the naval forces as a tool for achieving national security. Seapower in maritime security also discusses how national states operate their navies outside their territorial waters. The naval power projection of states for warfare means, to secure sea lines of communication (abbreviated as SLOC), and increase the awareness of a states' presence in international waters is the core purpose of traditional maritime security. Protecting the SLOCs also includes search and rescue, preventing oil spills in ocean, regulation of maritime installations, and counter operations against piracy and terrorism. To establish such cooperative security, nation states must first engage in security cooperation activities that will give them the opportunity to create inclusive-relations, which eventually becomes the foundation for multilateral security frameworks. In terms of maritime security, security cooperation serves as a bridge that connects maritime security understanding of one state to the others. The inclusiveness of security cooperation would enable national states to become more involved in cooperating in common areas of maritime security despite the geopolitical restraints. Chris Rahman explained that maritime security cooperation has a comprehensive

[4] Brown, T. L. (2018). "Asia's Security Triangles: Maritime Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific". *East Asia*, Vol. 35, Issue 2, p. 173

[5] Till, G. (2009). *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd edition. Routledge, New York, p. 286

[6] Bueger, C. (2015). "What is Maritime Security?". *Marine Policy*, Vol. 53, p. 160

approach to address the growing contemporary maritime security issues[7]. In the Indo-Pacific, for example, where maritime security issues continue to grow due to domestic political differences, maritime security cooperation offers a platform for regional states to communicate based on their commonalities to protect the regional SLOCs. However, to establish effective maritime security cooperation, it is necessary to set up the spectrum of maritime security activities that are deemed as inclusive.

The 21st century is considered to be "the century of seas and oceans" and is accompanied by fierce competition among world powers to gain strategic interests in the seas. If in the past they were only interested in competing for military goals, geostrategic bases and sea traffic flows, today countries around the world have promoted competition for economic benefits and marine resources. The development of military power and activities to compete for resources at sea increasingly shows the tendency to use the sea to control the continent. The "Sea power" theory of American foremost thinkers on naval warfare and maritime strategy - Alfred T. Mahan, has generated a premise for nations promoting sea power: *"Control of the sea, by maritime commerce and naval supremacy, means predominant influence in the world; because, however great the wealth product of the land, nothing facilitates the necessary exchanges as does the sea"*[8]. Maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region has therefore become a "hot" focus in the maritime foreign policy agenda of powers. During the first two decades of the 21st century, China, the United States, Japan, India, Australia, Russia and the European Union (EU) have both come up with strategies to connect the Indo-Pacific region and consider maritime security a part of those strategies.

For China, with its position in Asia and the world, this superpower cannot ignore the strategically important region like the Indian Ocean-Pacific. Since the Cold War, especially in the first two decades of the 21st century, the rise of China has had a strong influence on world development, changing the global balance of power. *"China is shifting the balance of power in the Eastern Hemisphere, and that will substantially concern the United States. On land and at sea, abetted by China's favorable location on the map, Beijing's influence is emanating from Central Asia to the Russian Far East, and from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean"*[9]. China has been stepping up its presence in the Indo-Pacific with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its "String of Pearls" strategy. The BRI of this powerful country placed the highest priority on the maritime sector when it proposed The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (commonly just Maritime Silk Road - MSR) with the goal of connecting seaports. This is one of the two main connections between

[7] Rahman, C. (2009). *Concepts of Maritime Security: A Strategic Perspective on Alternative Visions for Good Order and Security at Sea, with Policy Implications for New Zealand*. Victoria University Press, Wellington, p. 31

[8] Mahan, A. T. (1897). *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future*. Little, Brown & Company, Boston, p. 124

[9] Kaplan, R. D. (2012). *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*. Random House, New York, p. 200

China and Europe[10]. In addition, China's "two-ocean" strategy was implemented to expand its naval forces to the Indian Ocean[11].

For the US, the Indo-Pacific strategy expected that numerous vital sea lanes of this region would *"create the foundation for global commerce and prosperity."*[12]. Therefore, the US strives to create a free and open Indo-Pacific by promoting economic, governance, and security linkages. In early June 2019, the US Department of Defense officially released the first "Indo-Pacific Strategy" Report. The US's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy is built on three pillars: security, economics and governance. The US's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy focuses on ensuring the country's interests, focusing on the "4P" formula in a clear order of priority: Prosperity, Peace, Power through the deployment of US power and finally influence through US values and principles (Principles)[13]. The core objective of the US's Indo-Pacific strategy is to form an alliance axis, including the US, Japan, Australia and India (The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, colloquially the Quad or QUAD), to contain and prevent the China's rise, preserve control over the entire area and maintain the US's economic interests, political influence, military strength, and diplomacy subsequently[14].

For Japan, the Indo-Pacific is essentially a maritime region. The 2012 Japanese Defense White Paper stated: *"Maritime security based on respect for the rights and freedom of navigation is the foundation of peace and security for Japan, a maritime nation"*[15]. Japan also launched the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy to emphasize the importance of linking the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. This initiative has three pillars: *(1) Promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, etc. (2) The pursuit of economic prosperity through enhancing connectivity (3) Commitment for peace and stability*[16]. The main goals of Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" Initiative are: First, to promote connectivity between Asia, the Middle East and

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[10] Kuo, L. & Kommenda, N. (2018). "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative?". *https://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2018/jul/30/what-china-belt-road-initiative-silk-road-explainer* (accessed on March 3, 2022).

[11] The State Council of the People's Republic of China (2017). "Full Text of the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative". *http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm* (accessed on March 10, 2022).

[12] The US Department of Defense (2019). "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region". *https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF* (accessed on March 15, 2022).

[13] Nguyễn Huy Hoàng (chủ biên, 2021). *Đông Nam Á trong chiến lược Ấn Độ Dương - Thái Bình Dương của Hoa Kỳ* [Southeast Asia in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy]. Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 49

[14] Phạm Thị Thanh Bình & Vũ Nhật Quang (2020). ""Chiến lược Ấn Độ Dương - Thái Bình Dương tự do và rộng mở" của Mỹ: Vai trò và cách thức triển khai" [The US Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy: Role and Implementation]. *Tạp chí Cộng sản*, No. 938, Vietnam, p. 103

[15] Ministry of Defense of Japan (2012). "Defense of Japan 2012". *http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2012/07_Part1_Chapter1_Sec3.pdf* (accessed on August 7, 2022)

[16] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2021). "Free and Open Indo-Pacific". *https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000430632.pdf*, (accessed on March 6, 2022).

Africa, in which the Indian Ocean is of strategic geopolitical importance to Japan's security; Second, to strengthen Japan's image and global position as a major power; Third, to further strengthen its alliance with the United States; Fourth, to balance influence with China[17].

For India, as a continental power and occupying a strategic position in the center of the Indian Ocean, this country has become a prominent player in the Indo-Pacific. Since 1992, India's "Look East" policy aims to develop close economic relations with East Asian countries, especially Southeast Asia. India's engagement in the region has changed from economic to security over the years. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Act East" policy (since 2014) has underpinned India's approach to the Indo-Pacific region, in which this foreign policy will boost Indian participation. India will benefit from strategic collaborations. Furthermore, this country has its own vision for the Indo-Pacific. India aspires to foster peace and stability by treating all ships and planes equally, ensuring freedom of navigation, combating maritime crime, safeguarding the marine environment, and developing a green economy[18]. India's Indo-Pacific Initiative consists of seven pillars, including: maritime security, the marine ecosystem, marine resources, capacity building and resource sharing, managing and reducing disaster risk, technology and trade cooperation, and connection maritime transport[19].

Australia was one of the first countries to support and publicize the Indo-Pacific concept. Australia's 2009 Defense White Paper states: "*Over the period to 2030, the Indian Ocean will join the Pacific Ocean in terms of its centrality to our maritime strategy and defence planning*"[20]. Australia put the priority for maritime security and pledged to invest in maritime security capacity-building in the Indo-Pacific, raised awareness of the regional maritime sector, environmental protection, the sea and international law, freedom of navigation and aviation[21]. *Russia* put forward the idea of establishing an open economic space in the Eurasian continent (called the "Great Eurasian Initiative"), with the integration of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), ASEAN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The essence of this initiative aims at "Toward the Great Ocean", linking Russia with the Greater Eurasia, a vast land from Europe to East Asia[22].

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[17] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2021). "Free and Open Indo-Pacific". *https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000430632.pdf*, (accessed on March 6, 2022).

[18] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2018). "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue". *https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/prime+ministers+keynote+address+at+shangri+la+dialogue+june+01+2018* (accessed on March 3, 2022).

[19] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2020). "Indo-Pacific Division Briefs". *https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf* (accessed on February 22, 2022).

[20] Australian Government (2009). *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030 (Defence White Paper 2009)*. Department of Defence, Australia, p. 37

[21] Australian Government (2017). *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*. Department of Foreign Policy, Australia, p. 47

[22] The Valdai Club (2017). "Toward the Great Ocean - 5: From the Turn to the East to Greater Eurasia". *http://valdaiclub.com/files/15300/* (accessed on January 27, 2022).

EU also launched the "Connecting Europe and Asia" strategy to link Europe with Asia through transport, energy and digital connectivity. In particular, maritime connectivity holds an important position because sea routes carry 70% of the value of trade between Europe and Asia[23]. With the ambition to create a solid foothold for member countries in the region considered the center of world political and economic interests, at the April 2021 meeting, the foreign ministers of 27 EU member states approved the EU's Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific[24]. It can be said that this is a big step forward for the EU in engaging and increasing its presence in this geostrategic region.

For the time being, the Indo-Pacific region is by and large peaceful and secured; however, it is confronted with some maritime security challenges:

Firstly, regarding maritime disputes, there are about 40 maritime disputes between countries in the region, which could be disputes over territorial sovereignty or sovereign rights over the waters. Many disputes, including those in East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean or Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, are viewed as potential flashpoints for a Sino-US war or even a Third World War[25]. Although no direct armed conflict has ever occurred in said areas, they are at the root of the region's growing security threats. These conflicts are primarily caused by various security demands of many states in the region. Furthermore, these areas are considerably essential to geostrategy, which is why disputes are a complex issue in Indo-Pacific maritime security.

Secondly, piracy and armed robbery have driven the Strait of Malacca, South China Sea[26] and Indian Ocean to the top of the list of the most dangerous waters. In 2018, the number of piracy and robbery cases in these areas was 8, 57 and 25, respectively, placing them second only to West Africa, which had 81 cases[27]. While the number of piracy cases in South China Sea and Indian Ocean decreased to 34 and 10, piracy cases in Malacca Strait increased to 45 in 2019[28]. Apart from that, another notable transnational maritime security issue in Indo-Pacific is piracy off the coast of Somalia, which affects the waters off the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, and the

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[23] European Commission (2018). *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank: Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy*. Publications Office of the European Union, Brussels, p. 3

[24] Pejsova, E. (2021). "The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy in 10 Points". *https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/the-eus-indo-pacific-strategy-in-10-points/* (accessed on September 10, 2021).

[25] Echle, C., Gaens, B., Sarmah, M. & Rueppel, P. (2020). *Responding to the Geopolitics of Connectivity: Asian and European Perspectives*. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Bonn, p. 126

[26] According to the Vietnamese way of calling it "Biển Đông"

[27] International Maritime Organization (2019). *Reports on Acts of Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships: Annual Report - 2018*. London, p. 2

[28] International Maritime Organization (2020). *Reports on Acts of Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships: Annual Report - 2019*. London, p. 2

Western Indian Ocean[29]. In response to this threat, the United Nations Security Council has passed Resolution 1816, which states that cooperating countries may enter Somali territorial waters and use all necessary means to combat piracy and armed robbery[30].

Thirdly, in addition to piracy, the Indo-Pacific region is a hub for terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and Al Shabab. Ever since the "September 11 terrorist event", Singapore, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia have regularly coordinated with their naval forces to combat terrorism in the Strait of Malacca to protect oil tankers passing through the region. New maritime security risks are emerging, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, as terrorists use the Malay Archipelago as a hideout to spot vulnerable targets in the region, as well as to coordinate with extremists, Islamic rebels, or members of organized crime networks. This fear has become much more real since the 2002 Bali bombings[31]. Besides, Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations such as Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah have spread maritime terrorism in Southeast Asia to the region. The Super Ferry 14 bombing in the Philippines in 2004 is considered the world's bloodiest maritime terrorist attack to date, killing 116 people[32].

Lastly, drug trafficking and human trafficking are frequent transnational concerns in the Indo-Pacific. Many multinational organized criminal groups rely heavily on drug trafficking by water for a significant portion of their revenue. Drugs produced in Afghanistan, India and Indonesia are transported by sea to other countries via illegal markets. The manufacture and transport of drugs is rising in the Indo-Pacific region, and criminal groups are exploiting the Malacca Strait as their primary distribution route to Southeast Asia countries[33]. Moreover, human trafficking issue remains unresolved as the coast guard or the security department of port and ship facilities cannot predict the consequences. Furthermore, one of the threats to maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region is arms trafficking. Most of the arms trade was carried by criminal organizations by sea in containers from southern Thailand to Aceh, Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka via the Malacca Strait and the Andaman Sea[34]. The rise in

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[29] Elleman, B. A., Forbes, A. & Rosenberg, D. (2010). *Piracy and Maritime Crime: Historical and Modern Case Studies*. Naval War College Press, Newport, p. 210

[30] Klein, N. (2011). *Maritime Security and the Law of the Sea*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 280

[31] Tan, A. T. H. (2011). *Security Strategies in the Asia-Pacific: The United States' "Second Front" in Southeast Asia*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, p. 91

[32] Safety4Sea website (2019). "Superferry14: The World's Deadliest Terrorist Attack at Sea". *https://safety4sea.com/cm-superferry14-the-worlds-deadliest-terrorist-attack-at-sea/* (accessed on March 6, 2022).

[33] Zulkifli, N., Ibrahim, R. I. R., Rahman, A. A. A. and Yasid, A. F. M. (2020). "Maritime Cooperation in the Straits of Malacca (2016-2020): Challenges and Recommend For a New Framework". *Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 19

[34] Zulkifli, N., Ibrahim, R. I. R., Rahman, A. A. A. and Yasid, A. F. M. (2020). "Maritime Cooperation in the Straits of Malacca (2016-2020): Challenges and Recommend for a New Framework", *Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 19

arms trade is a key factor to the rise in maritime crime in Southeast Asia in particular, and the Indo-Pacific as a whole.

Certainly, disputes over maritime territorial sovereignty or sovereign rights, as well as close links between transnational crimes, piracy and terrorism, have increased the complexity of non-traditional maritime threats in the Indo-Pacific, which has a strong impact on the foreign policy of a coastal country like Vietnam.

3.   Some policy implications for Vietnam in maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Located in the heart of Southeast Asia, Vietnam holds an important strategic position in the Indo-Pacific region, which can be viewed as a "bridge" on land between the largest portion of Eurasia and Southeast Asia that serves as a link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. In recent years, Vietnam and regional countries' policy is influenced by rapid land reclamation activities on reefs and small islands, by the increase in tensions over competing claims of maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea, as well as China's insistence on restricting resolution to bilateral mechanisms and refusing to comply with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Currently, Vietnam is a key contributor to the Indo-Pacific region's security growth, particularly in non-traditional maritime and security domains. Among the nations in the eastern Indian Ocean, Vietnam has become one of the most vocal nations in regional territorial and maritime disputes, as well as one of the leading nations in favor of restraining or confronting China[35]. Considering the maritime security situation of the Indo-Pacific in the first two decades of the 21st century, Vietnam needs to make decisions in foreign policy in the following years to ensure maritime cooperation in this region, namely:

First, Vietnam must take advantage from leading international organizations such as: President of the United Nations Security Council (July 2008 and October 2009), Chairman of ASEAN (2020), President of 41st ASEAN Inter Parliamentary Assembly (2020), Non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (term 2008-2009, 2020-2021) and so forth to enhance national status in the international scene; to actively strengthen diplomatic relations with nations in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly to build a united, unified ASEAN while avoiding internal divisions; to balance national and ethnic interests; to maintain flexible, diplomatic, neutral policies and avoid dependence and influence by superpowers. By 2024, Vietnam has established diplomatic relations with 194 countries, upgraded relations to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Australia, France and Malaysia, upgraded to Strategic Partnership with Brazil and established Comprehensive Partnership with Mongolia

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[35] Basu, P. (2020). "The Rising Prominence of Vietnam for the Indo-Pacific". *https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-rising-prominence-of-vietnam-for-the-indo-pacific/* (accessed on May 10, 2021).

and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), bringing the total number of partners within the framework of relations to 32 and signed more than 170 cooperation agreements in many fields[36]. In a way, Vietnam's participation in this largest multilateral playground has contributed to improving Vietnam's image and status, promoting bilateral relations as well as international integration in general and maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in particular.

Second, it is necessary to constantly promote Vietnamese history and culture to the world to acquire international sympathy and support for issues directly connected to national interests and security, to territorial disputes, territorial sovereignty and jurisdiction, and so on. Besides, Vietnam must consider its involvement in global issues such as regional security and world peace. With the global Covid-19 pandemic affecting every aspect of social, political, economic life and particularly public health, the entire political system has performed well its dual missions of fighting the pandemic and stabilizing the environment to improve the economy and society under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party. This is not only Vietnam's huge achievement in 2020, but it also lays a favorable foundation for Vietnam in foreign affairs in 2021, contributing to the promotion of Vietnam's image, nation, people to the world, and strengthening its national standing in the Indo-Pacific. All of this has contributed to the effectiveness of maritime cooperation between Vietnam and several regional countries.

Third, during the first two decades of the 21ˢᵗ century, the South China Sea situation has remained complex, with many unstable factors. To preserve a stable environment in the South China Sea, Vietnam must promote bilateral dialogue with countries based on providing a peaceful environment, respecting legal order at sea and international law, especially the 1982 UNCLOS, without complicating the situation. Vietnam must utilize the support of ASEAN member states in addressing tensions in the South China Sea by keeping South China Sea concerns on this organization's political and security agenda[37]. On international forums, in all high-level leadership exchanges with countries in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as contacts at all levels of Vietnam, it is necessary to declare its position on the South China Sea issue, affirming peace, stability, cooperation, and development in the East Sea as the common aspirations and goals of coastal and regional countries, as well as the international community.

Fourth, Vietnam needs policies that are consistent with its partners, with countries that share the common views, to develop Indo-Pacific strategies via bilateral or multilateral joint statements. Vietnam also needs to further strengthen strategic cooperation with superpowers,

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[36] Bùi Thanh Sơn (2025). Đối ngoại Việt Nam năm 2024: Tích cực, chủ động góp phần tạo đà đưa đất nước bước vào kỷ nguyên mới [Vietnam's Foreign Affairs in 2024: Actively and Proactively Contributing to Creating Momentum to Propelling Vietnam into New Era]. *https://nhandan.vn/doi-ngoai-viet-nam-nam-2024-tich-cuc-chu-dong-gop-phan-tao-da-dua-dat-nuoc-buoc-vao-ky-nguyen-moi-post853812.html* (accessed on January 10, 2025)

[37] Wilson, J. (2018). *Vietnam in the Indo-Pacific: Challenges and Opportunities in a New Regional Landscape*. Perth USAsia Centre at The University of Western Australia, Perth, p. 37

particularly the United States, Australia, India and Japan, along with the QUAD, to strengthen regional cooperation and improve its negotiating position with China. As China's aggressively implementing the "Belt and Road Initiative", Vietnam must the key industries that prioritize economic development, and private sectors selectively, in order to seize several opportunities, tap into the potential of the United States, and attract foreign direct investment (FDI) to develop the economy in this new stage, to construct material and technical facilities, to acquire cutting-edge modern technology, to actively expand trade and tourism.

Last, Vietnam should take advantage of the funding of major countries to equip modern equipment, to seize opportunities for military training to strengthen national defense and security, to work with other countries to fight against piracy, terrorism, drug and arms trafficking... to ensure maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Apart from that, Vietnam needs a tight security cooperation policy with nations in the region, particularly ASEAN states, that clearly declares its view on ASEAN's common interests as the link between regional security frameworks. Simultaneously, Vietnam must promote cooperation with other global security partners to maintain regional order and maritime security based on general principles, as well as develop a regional security structure that is not dominated by any superpower.

4.   Conclusion

As the center of global economic, geopolitical and security dynamics, the Indo-Pacific needs comprehensive cooperation in maritime security. Regional maritime security cooperation is essential for maintaining maritime operations and maintaining sea lines of communication. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific is a site where fierce competition among the world's superpowers takes place. China's expansion of maritime influence, India's rise as a regional power, the US' Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and the region's non-traditional maritime challenges have all been at the center of multilateral talks for Indo-Pacific maritime security. Disputes in the South China Sea also pose several risks and threats to regional security. The US' "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", along with the QUAD must be carefully studied. The United States, Australia, India and Japan share a common view of a general strategy in the Indo-Pacific, which is China's maritime expansion. Apart from that, China has become a key commercial and investment partner in the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, some countries in the region do not welcome this country's naval presence, resulting in territorial disputes and security instability. It may be argued, said superpowers' power struggle will decide the pattern of interaction between the Indo-Pacific's nations in the coming years of the 21st century.

The dynamic development of the Indo-Pacific in conjunction with critical maritime security challenges has enhanced the role of ASEAN, of which Vietnam is an active, responsible member, allowing Vietnam to improve its national power and standing in the international scene. With the formation of a new world order, the rapid change of the regional situation, the

state of Indo-Pacific maritime security, Vietnam is compelled to propose feasible foreign policy decisions accordingly and contribute to the common law in accordance with international law and national interests. In the battle to protect maritime sovereignty, Vietnam should utilize the support of regional and international countries and organizations, particularly the role of the United States, Japan, India, the European Union, and ASEAN, based on an independent, autonomous, open, diversified, and multilateralism approach.

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