

Countering the Waves: Vietnam's Bilateral Relations with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia in the South China Sea

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Abstract

China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea has *heightened* security pressures on Vietnam. However, existing studies have not fully explained why Vietnam prioritizes bilateral cooperation with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. This article addresses this gap by examining Vietnam's alignment choices from 2016 to 2024 through Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory. Using a qualitative within-case design, the study operationalizes Walt's four variables—aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions—to analyze how Vietnam interprets China's behavior and why these perceptions push Hanoi to strengthen ties with these three Southeast Asian partners. The findings show that China is the only actor fulfilling all four components of a perceived threat, while the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia are viewed as non-threatening states with shared interests in upholding maritime rights under UNCLOS. As a result, Vietnam has expanded defense exchanges, coast guard cooperation, and diplomatic coordination with these partners to mitigate China's strategic advantages. This article contributes to the scholarship by providing a structured, theory-based explanation of Vietnam's selective minilateral cooperation, an underdeveloped aspect of the literature.



INTRODUCTION

The South China Sea (SCS) has become one of the world's most contested maritime regions due to its strategic position, dense shipping routes, and substantial energy and fisheries resources. According to CSIS estimates, approximately USD 3.37 trillion of global trade passes through the area annually, underscoring its systemic importance for regional and extra-regional economies (Sangtam, 2021). Simultaneously, overlapping maritime and territorial claims involving Vietnam, China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan have intensified competition and contributed to the erosion of regional stability (Thayer, 2013). As China attempts to extend its military presence, Vietnam faces growing challenges to its sovereignty, access to resources, and maritime security through land reclamation, airstrip construction, and ever-increasing coast guard patrols. Grossman notes that Beijing's coercive presence directly threatens Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and its "economic lifeline," placing Hanoi under sustained strategic pressure (Grossman, 2018).

Against this backdrop, Vietnam has increasingly relied on selective regional partnerships to address rising threats. Since 2016, episodes such as the Vanguard Bank standoff and China's intrusive patrols have reinforced Hanoi's perception that unilateral defense measures are insufficient (SeaLight, 2024). Vietnam's cooperation with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia—ranging from coast guard coordination to diplomatic alignment in international forums—reflects a pragmatic effort to strengthen its position without provoking full-scale confrontation (Wei, 2024). This calibrated strategy has been described as one of "cooperating and struggling," in which Vietnam simultaneously resists China's assertiveness while engaging in multilateral diplomacy to avoid escalation (Thayer, 2016).

However, existing scholarship provides only partial explanations for why Vietnam prioritizes these three specific ASEAN neighbors. Studies have extensively analyzed Vietnam's hedging toward China (e.g., Ha Anh Tuan, 2020; Le Hong Hiep, 2013) and Vietnam-US security ties (Sangtam, 2021),

but they offer limited insight into why mini-lateral cooperation with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia has intensified since 2016. Moreover, while Kuik's hedging framework highlights the contradictory policies of Southeast Asian states (Kuik, 2024), few studies apply a structured threat-based analysis to Vietnam's alignment behavior within ASEAN. This gap is important, as understanding Vietnam's partner choices may help explain how smaller states deal with power asymmetry and selective cooperation in contested maritime spaces. To address this gap, this article asks: Why did Vietnam cooperate with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia to balance China's influence and protect its territorial interests in the South China Sea?

Using Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, the study evaluates how Vietnam's perceptions of aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions shape its alignment strategy. By focusing on concrete episodes between 2016 and 2024—such as the 2019 Vanguard Bank incident, the Philippines v. China arbitration aftermath, Malaysia's continental shelf submission, and Indonesia's responses to Natuna incursions—the article demonstrates how Vietnam interprets differentiated threat levels among regional actors and why this drives targeted bilateral cooperation.

Finally, this study argues that Vietnam's engagement with these three states constitutes a form of selective ASEAN mini-lateralism, where cooperation is purposefully limited to partners sharing similar threat perceptions and legal-maritime interests. This section concludes by sketching the structure of the article: it first reviews the theoretical expectations of balance of threat, then examines Vietnam's bilateral interactions with each partner, and finally evaluates whether these alignments collectively function as a balancing response to China's expanding regional influence.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative within-case design to explain why Vietnam strengthened its cooperation with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia between 2016 and 2024. The analysis was theory-guided, using Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory as the analytical framework. Each of Walt's four variables—aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions—was operationalized to trace how Vietnam interpreted China's behavior and why these perceptions generated incentives for bilateral alignment with the three Southeast Asian partners (Walt, 1985). The study relied exclusively on publicly available secondary sources, including maritime incident reports, official statements, white papers on defense, ASEAN documents, scholarly research, and analyses produced by reputable regional security organizations and think tanks.

These materials provided qualitative evidence of state behavior, threat perception, and cooperation patterns in the South China Sea. The method focused on interpretive explanation rather than causal measurement, linking empirical developments directly to shifts in perceived threat under each theoretical variable. This approach was appropriate because threat perception and alignment behavior cannot be captured through quantitative indicators alone; they must be understood through contextual interpretation of state actions and official discourse. Therefore, the method allowed the study to assess whether Vietnam's cooperative behavior with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia aligned with the expectations of balance of threat theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section evaluates Vietnam's behavior through Walt's Balance of Threat framework to explain why it cooperated with the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. By comparing China with these three neighbors across four threat dimensions - aggregate power, proximity, offensive capabilities, and intentions - the analysis shows how Vietnam distinguishes a primary threat from potential partners. This comparison of variables directly links Vietnam's differentiated perceptions to its selective bilateral cooperation.

Aggregate Power of Vietnam, China, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines

China's aggregate power, reflected in its economic scale, demographic weight, and sustained defense modernization, creates the most fundamental and enduring source of threat for Vietnam. China's expanding defense budget and rapid naval modernization give Beijing structural advantages that no Southeast Asian state can match (SIPRI, 2024; IISS, 2024). What matters for Vietnam is not the absolute numbers themselves, but the strategic effect produced by China's combined capabilities.

China's economic and demographic base allows it to maintain a large defense budget and expand naval and coast guard deployments across the South China Sea (RAND Corporation, 2020). These capacities enable China to project influence continuously and to challenge Vietnam's maritime claims in ways that smaller states cannot replicate.

Vietnam interprets China's aggregate power as a structural condition that shapes and constrains Vietnam's ability to protect its maritime interests. Unlike the Philippines, Malaysia, or Indonesia, whose economic size and defense capacity remain significant but limited, China possesses the scale to alter the regional balance of power on its own (Thayer, 2016). This disparity elevates China above all other regional actors in Vietnam's threat assessment. The Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia possess sufficient capacity to contribute to maritime stability but not enough to impose unilateral outcomes. As a result, Vietnam views China as a systemic threat, while the three ASEAN partners are seen as complementary actors that can strengthen Vietnam's resilience (Tüter, 2022).

Key developments between 2016 and 2024 further intensified Vietnam's perception of China's aggregate power as an active security challenge. The 2016 arbitral ruling underscored legal conflict with China (PCA, 2016); the 2019 Vanguard Bank standoff demonstrated China's ability to sustain long-duration pressure (ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019); and repeated coast guard and maritime militia deployments after 2020 highlighted China's operational capacity to maintain a constant presence in disputed waters (CSIS AMTI, 2024; O'Rourke, 2024). Escalations in 2023-2024 reinforced that China's aggregate power translates into real-world coercive leverage (CSIS AMTI, 2024). These episodes show Vietnam that aggregate power is not an abstract imbalance, but a lived strategic reality.

From the perspective of Balance of Threat theory, China's aggregate power drives Vietnam to seek cooperative arrangements with other claimant states to compensate for its structural vulnerability. Vietnam cannot narrow the power gap with China alone, but cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines allows Vietnam to pool economic, diplomatic, and operational resources (Le, 2013). Indonesia contributes demographic and economic weight, Malaysia reinforces stability in the southern South China Sea, while the Philippines provides legal legitimacy and frontline operational presence in the Spratly Islands (Tüter, 2022). Together, these partners help Vietnam reduce its exposure to China's structural advantages and strengthen its capacity to manage maritime disputes.

Vietnam's strategic response therefore reflects necessity, not preference. China's aggregate power is overwhelming; the three ASEAN partners do not pose comparable risks; and mini-lateral cooperation offers the most practical mechanism for Vietnam to mitigate the structural disadvantages identified under Balance of Threat theory (Walt, 1985). In this logic, aggregate power becomes the foundational driver that explains why Vietnam relies on the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia to balance the region's most threatening actors. Although Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines all contribute to Vietnam's efforts to manage China's aggregate power, their roles are differentiated rather than equal. The Philippines provides the strongest legal and political counterweight to China because it openly internationalizes maritime incidents and upholds the 2016 arbitral ruling, which indirectly strengthens Vietnam's legal position. In contrast, Malaysia adopts a quieter diplomatic posture but reinforces stability in the southern South China Sea, especially around the Luconia Shoals, where Chinese pressure also challenges regional norms. Indonesia brings the greatest demographic and economic weight among the three, and its firm stance near the Natuna EEZ helps dilute China's dominance in the southern sector. This variation shows that Vietnam's partners contribute complementary, not identical, forms of balancing that collectively reduce the aggregate power of China's structural advantages.

Geographic Proximity between Vietnam, China, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines

Geographic proximity magnifies how Vietnam evaluates China as a threat and shapes Hanoi's view of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines as useful partners under Balance of Threat theory. Balance of Threat argues that states are most concerned about powerful neighbors whose capabilities can be quickly projected across short distances (Walt, 1987). In the South China Sea, distance is not neutral: the states closest to Chinese military and coast guard deployments experience the most direct pressure and therefore have the strongest incentives to coordinate.

Vietnam's land and maritime borders with China make geography a permanent vulnerability. Vietnam shares a long land frontier with China and a continuous coastline facing Chinese facilities on

Hainan, the Paracels and Chinese-occupied features in the Spratlys, compressing strategic depth to a narrow coastal belt. Le Hong Hiep describes this as a “tyranny of geography”, where Vietnam is structurally exposed to Chinese pressure by virtue of its location and much smaller size (Le, 2011). This proximity means that Chinese naval, air and coast guard assets can reach Vietnamese waters faster and at lower cost than those of any other major power, reinforcing Hanoi's perception that geography makes China an immediate, not abstract, security challenge.

The same geography also explains why Hanoi views the Philippines and Malaysia as front-line partners rather than distant actors. The Spratly chain “curves along the South China Sea's southern rim”, and several features lie within the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Sacks, 2022). Chinese-occupied Mischief Reef and Second Thomas Shoal are much closer to the Philippine island of Palawan than to China's mainland, while Chinese positions around Luconia Shoals lie off the coast of Sarawak. Carpio's mapping of distances shows that many Chinese-occupied or claimed features are within a few hundred nautical miles of the coasts of Southeast Asia but several hundred nautical miles from China proper (Carpio, 2015). For Vietnam, this means that Manila and Kuala Lumpur face similar “front-line” exposure to Chinese patrols and reclamation, which creates convergent interests in defending EEZ rights and resisting excessive maritime claims.

Indonesia's position is different but still geographically linked to Vietnam's threat assessment. The Natuna Islands sit on the southern edge of the South China Sea and are “entirely under Indonesian control and not under dispute”, yet part of their EEZ area overlaps China's nine-dash line claim (Sacks, 2022). Since 2016, Jakarta has repeatedly protested Chinese fishing and coast guard incursions near Natuna, framing them as violations of Indonesia's sovereign rights. These incidents show that even a nonclaimant like Indonesia is drawn into the dispute because of the geographic overlap between its EEZ and China's expansive claims, pushing it closer to Vietnam on specific maritime law and enforcement issues.

Events between 2016 and 2024 make the geographic logic of threat very concrete for Vietnam. The 2019 Vanguard Bank standoff occurred approximately 160 nautical miles from Vietnam's coast but approximately 600 nautical miles from China's Hainan Island. However, Chinese survey ships and coast guard vessels that maintained a months-long presence in Vietnam's EEZ (Lye & Ha, 2019; Do, 2019). Similar patterns appeared in later Chinese patrols around Vanguard Bank in 2023-2024 and repeated Chinese activities near Natuna and Philippine-claimed features such as Second Thomas Shoal. From Hanoi's perspective, these episodes confirm that the states most affected by China's assertive operations are precisely those closest to Chinese deployments, and that geography ties Vietnam's security outlook is linked to that of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Geographic proximity therefore does not just define where incidents happen; it structures Vietnam's choice to deepen bilateral defense, coast guard, and diplomatic coordination with these three neighbors as a way to mitigate the concentrated threat posed by China's nearby presence.

Comparatively, Vietnam perceives geographic threat differently across its partners. The Philippines shares the closest frontline exposure with Vietnam because both face Chinese pressure around the Spratlys and adjacent EEZ zones. Malaysia experiences similar, though less frequent, incursions in the southern sector, which aligns it with Vietnam on the need for maintaining EEZ rights but without Manila's level of urgency. Indonesia's exposure is geographically narrower, concentrated near the Natuna Islands, yet Jakarta's reaction has grown stronger as Chinese vessels test its EEZ boundaries. These variations indicate that Vietnam collaborates more intensively with the Philippines where the geographic threat is most acute, while cooperation with Malaysia and Indonesia is designed to widen Vietnam's buffer and distribute China's operational attention across multiple fronts.

Offensive Capabilities of Vietnam, China, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines

Offensive capabilities are a core element in Balance of Threat theory because they shape how easily one state can harm another (Walt, 1987). Vietnam's assessment of China, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines is therefore influenced not only by their aggregate power but also by how far and how effectively each state can project force into the South China Sea. The distribution of offensive capabilities in the region makes China the only actor capable of sustained power projection near Vietnam's coast, while the military forces of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines remain limited, largely coastal, and defensive in orientation.

China possesses by far the strongest offensive capabilities in the South China Sea. According to the 2025 Congressional Research Service report, China fields the world's largest navy by fleet size, supported by modern surface combatants, submarines, aircraft carriers, and long-range missile systems designed for near-seas power projection (O'Rourke, 2025). These blue-water capabilities are reinforced by militarised artificial islands across the Spratly and Paracel groups. Satellite-based assessments published by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative show that China has deployed long-range radar systems, hardened aircraft shelters, combat-ready runways, and surface-to-air and anti-ship missile batteries on Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef (AMTI, 2025). These facilities enable China to sustain continuous offensive presence, launch air and naval operations across the region, and directly threaten Vietnamese installations and maritime zones. No Southeast Asian claimant possesses the ability to counter or match this level of offensive reach.

In contrast, although Vietnam's offensive capabilities remain limited but have undergone measurable modernization in recent years. According to *The Military Balance 2024*, Vietnam operates six Project-636 Kilo-class submarines, four Gepard-class guided-missile frigates equipped with Kh-35 Uran anti-ship missiles, several Molniya-class missile corvettes, and a growing inventory of coastal defense systems (IISS, 2024). Vietnam also fields the K-300P Bastion-P coastal missile system armed with P-800/Yakhont supersonic anti-ship missiles, which provide credible anti-access capabilities within its exclusive economic zone (IISS, 2024). SIPRI's 2024 military-expenditure database notes that Vietnam continues to prioritize sea-denial assets over blue-water expansion, focusing its defense budget on systems capable of imposing significant costs on hostile vessels operating near Vietnam's coastline or offshore energy platforms (SIPRI, 2024). While these assets do not give Vietnam the ability to project power deep into the South China Sea, they do provide credible offensive tools against Chinese ships approaching Vietnamese waters. Therefore, Vietnam's limited capability for sea denial reduces, but does not eliminate, China's ability to escalate without consequence.

Indonesia's offensive capabilities remain modest but increasingly relevant to the balance of forces in the southern sector of the South China Sea. Indonesia operates one Cakra-class and three Nagapasa-class submarines and is pursuing Scorpène-class submarines in partnership with France, supported by a new submarine base near the Natuna Islands (NTI, 2024). CSIS analysis further notes that Jakarta's naval modernization aims to combine submarines, frigates, and fast missile craft to defend its EEZ, especially in waters affected by Chinese incursions (Supriyanto, 2022). These capabilities allow Indonesia to threaten foreign vessels operating unlawfully in its EEZ, but they do not enable Indonesia to project offensive power against Vietnam or other neighboring countries.

Malaysia's offensive capabilities are similarly limited. Malaysia operates two Scorpène-class submarines, supported by a major naval base in Teluk Sepanggar, Sabah, which enables sustained patrols near Malaysian-claimed features in the Spratly Islands. Saravanamuttu (2021) notes that despite these assets, Malaysia maintains a restrained approach, relying on small but relatively sophisticated naval units and maritime patrol aircraft to defend its claims. Malaysia's force posture is therefore defensive and geographically bounded, posing no offensive threat to Vietnam.

The Philippines has historically possessed the weakest maritime forces, but its modernization program has begun to strengthen its limited offensive capabilities. According to Reuters, a defense modernization investment of USD 35 billion is planned by the government of Manila which will include new guided missile frigates, coastal anti-ship missile batteries (including the BrahMos systems) and future fighter aircraft (Lema & Morales, 2024). These systems give the Philippine a capacity to engage hostile vessels within their EEZ as well as provide a means of enforcing a deterring presence near divided features, such as the Second Thomas Shoal. However, the Philippines' force structure is still coastal and EEZ-focused with no capacity to project power offensive toward Vietnam.

In sum, only China has offensive capabilities that pose a credible threat to Vietnam's survival and maritime interests. The forces of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines are limited, defensive and more concerned with protecting their maritime zones. This distribution of offensive capabilities reinforces the perception of China as the main threat in Vietnam, and explains why Hanoi would want to cooperate more closely with its Southeast Asian neighbors: not to counter them, but to collectively mitigate the overwhelming offensive advantage that China holds in the South China Sea.

When comparing partners, Vietnam recognizes that each state's military capacity offers different strategic value. The Philippines has limited offensive capabilities but compensates by creating

political costs for China through transparency and external security dialogues, which indirectly benefits Vietnam's deterrence posture. Malaysia's small but capable navy and submarine fleet provide credible domain awareness in the southern South China Sea, complementing Vietnam's focus in the central and northern sectors. Indonesia, possessing the most expanded maritime modernization plans among the three, enhances patrol strength in the Natuna area and increases the overall regional cost for China's gray-zone operations. Thus, while none of these countries can balance China individually, their combined maritime capabilities create a more distributed and resilient balancing environment that Vietnam alone cannot achieve.

Perceived Intentions of Vietnam towards China, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines

Perceived intentions, how one state interprets the motives and long-term goals of another, constitute the most decisive component of Balance of Threat theory (Walt, 1987). While aggregate power, proximity, and offensive capabilities shape Vietnam's general vulnerability, it is China's perceived revisionism, coupled with the benign or cooperative intentions of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, that ultimately determines Vietnam's alignment choices. Vietnam consistently distinguishes between China as a strategic challenger and its Southeast Asian neighbors as partners whose intentions are not threatening.

Vietnam perceives China's intentions in the South China Sea as assertive, coercive, and expansionist. A broad body of scholarship documents how Beijing's behavior - ranging from expansive maritime claims, coercive surveillance patrols, and militarization of artificial islands - signals a long-term effort to alter the regional status quo in ways unfavorable to smaller states (Thayer, 2016; Storey, 2021). Analyses by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI, 2024) reveal that China is deploying coast guard, maritime militia, as well as naval assets in ways that seem intended to incrementally consolidate administrative control over disputed areas. Vietnam sees these patterns as proof of a continued attempt to exert pressure on its offshore energy activities, challenge its rights of jurisdiction, and affect its effective control over key features. Chinese behavior during the Vanguard Bank standoffs in 2019 and 2023, where China maintained prolonged pressure inside Vietnam's EEZ, further reinforced Hanoi's belief that China is willing to use gray-zone coercion to advance strategic aims rather than seek negotiated compromise (Lye & Ha, 2019; Do, 2019). Therefore, from Vietnam's perspective, therefore, China's intentions are not just competitive, but actively revisionist and hostile to Vietnamese sovereignty.

In contrast, Vietnam interprets Indonesia's intentions as fundamentally nonthreatening and increasingly aligned with its own interests. Although Indonesia is not a claimant in the Spratly Islands, Beijing's foray to the nearby Natuna islands has brought Jakarta closer to Hanoi on the issue of maritime law and EEZ protection. Policy analyses consistently demonstrate that Indonesia presents China's action as a violation of its sovereign rights, and not as a contest with its ASEAN neighbors in the region (Weatherbee, 2016; Suryadinata, 2020). Consequently, Indonesia is perceived as having defensive and status quo intentions. Indonesia wants to uphold UNCLOS norms rather than promote territorial ambitions, thus politicians expect their actions to not be seen as threatening, upon the part of Vietnam. Instead, they reveal an alignment of interests in resisting China's excessive maritime claims.

Vietnam also perceives Malaysia as a state with benign and predictable intentions. Malaysia maintains a historically quiet and diplomatic approach to the South China Sea, preferring low-visibility defense of its claims and avoiding confrontation with ASEAN neighbors (Saravanamuttu, 2021). Despite occasional operational frictions, Kuala Lumpur has never pursued policies that target Vietnamese-claimed waters or seek to expand its strategic space at Vietnam's expense. Even Malaysia's limited military modernization - such as its investment in Scorpène-class submarines - is framed by Malaysian policymakers as protecting offshore economic interests rather than revising maritime boundaries (Saravanamuttu, 2021). Therefore, Vietnam sees Malaysia not as a threat but as a cautious, cooperative regional actor whose maritime interests are similarly challenged by China's expanding presence.

The Philippines' intentions are also perceived positively. Since the 2016 arbitral ruling, Manila has consistently upheld international law and opposed China's expansive claims. Vietnam views the Philippines' legal approach as reinforcing the normative framework of the UNCLOS, which directly benefits Vietnamese positions. Manila's disclosure of Chinese coercive behavior at Second Thomas

Shoal and its expanding defense cooperation with external partners are interpreted by Hanoi as actions aimed at resisting China, not altering boundaries with Vietnam (Lema & Morales, 2024). Importantly, Vietnam and the Philippines have never had overlapping continental shelf or EEZ claims that place them in direct conflict, making the Philippines' intentions appear cooperative rather than competitive. This explains why Vietnam has pursued bilateral mechanisms for information-sharing and coast guard cooperation with Manila to manage Chinese pressure.

Taken together, perceived intentions create the clearest dividing line in Vietnam's balancing behavior. China's actions are being perceived as concerted and long-term efforts to extend control over contested waters to the detriment of Vietnamese sovereignty and long-term strategic freedom of action. In contrast, the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines share either overlapping vulnerabilities, or convergent interests: protecting EEZ rights, upholding the UNCLOS, and resisting coercion. Under Balance of Threat logic, Vietnam's strategic positioning with these Southeast Asian neighbors is strategic as their intentions are not threatening and China's intentions are perceived to be the biggest source of strategic danger. This perceptual contrast completes the logic of why Vietnam cooperates bilaterally with Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines to manage and counterbalance China's ambitions in the South China Sea. Therefore, these partners also differ in how reliably their intentions align with Vietnam's objectives. The Philippines is perceived as the most outward-facing and vocal defender of international law, making it the most politically aligned partner for shaping maritime narratives. Malaysia is viewed as cautious but consistently status-quo-oriented country, offering stable cooperation without risking escalation. Indonesia's intention is the most defensive and sovereignty-focused, but increasingly convergent: Jakarta's reactions near Natuna show a growing willingness to confront excessive maritime claims. This spectrum of intentions allows Vietnam to tailor cooperation - legal and diplomatic synchronization with the Philippines, maritime confidence-building with Malaysia, and law-enforcement coordination with Indonesia - creating a diversified partnership network grounded in shared but differentiated interests.

CONCLUSION

This article analyzed Vietnam's strengthened cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines from 2016 to 2024 through Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, revealing that Vietnam's alignment was driven by differentiated threat perceptions, with China posing the primary security concern due to its aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and assertive intentions in the South China Sea, while the three partners were seen as nonthreatening allies owing to their limited military capabilities, defensive postures, and adherence to UNCLOS. The study contributed by demonstrating that balance of threat theory offers a more precise explanation of Vietnam's targeted choices than broader hedging concepts, highlighting how specific threat assessments shape Southeast Asian small-state strategies. Despite limitations from relying on secondary sources and focusing solely on these three states, excluding broader regional and extra-regional actors, future research could enhance insights by incorporating primary sources, comparative analyses across the region, or examinations of extra-regional powers like the U.S., Japan, and India.

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