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Contents

Chinese Arms Transfers, Xinjiang, and the UN Human Rights Council Vote

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Abstract

This article examines the factors influencing UN Human Rights Council member states' votes on whether to debate human rights conditions in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of China in 2022. The explanations are categorized into three groups: (1) democracy, development, and human rights performance; (2) demographic factors; and (3) security and economic ties to major powers, specifically the United States and China. Using Bayesian model averaging, we identify three robust covariates of the UNHRC vote: liberal democratic domestic institutions, NATO membership, and Chinese arms transfers. Countries with higher democracy scores and NATO member countries were more likely to vote in favor, while recipients of Chinese arms transfers were more likely to vote against. Liberal democracy also exerts a significant indirect effect through its influence on Chinese arms transfers, with less democratic countries being more likely to receive Chinese arms. Participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not a robust covariate. Thus, our analysis supports interpreting the vote as a reflection of broader competition between the United States and China, but challenges some conventional wisdom about the two countries' strategies for building and mobilizing coalitions in international institutions. It also draws attention to China's more security-focused diplomatic statecraft.

Keywords: China, arms transfers, Belt and Road Initiative, Xinjiang, United Nations Human Rights Council

Introduction

On October 6, 2022, the 47 members of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC)—the UN body tasked with promoting and protecting human rights worldwide—held a vote on whether to discuss the findings of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' assessment of human rights conditions in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The assessment alleges that the Chinese government's actions under the auspices of counterterrorism and "extremism" may constitute "crimes against humanity" (Office of the High Commissioner 2022, p. 44).

The vote was called by a coalition of 26 mostly Western democracies, including UN Security Council members the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, as well as Australia, Canada, and Turkey.[1] The motion failed, with the final vote tally being 17 in favor, 19 against, and 11 abstentions (Table 1). The *Associated Press* described the vote as "a test of political and diplomatic clout between the West and Beijing" (Keaton 2022), with the West emerging as the loser and having to settle for a joint statement (not a resolution) condemning the abuses in the General Assembly (USUN 2022). This framing of the issue typifies a now ubiquitous narrative of rising major competition between the United States and China, despite the two countries' continued economic interdependence.

What role did China's expanding economic links—including loans, international trade linkages, participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and arms sales/transfers—play? Writing in the *East Asia Forum*, Anna Hayes (2022) argued that "through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has used economic coercion, inducement, harassment and manipulation to undermine the international human rights framework." Bloomberg also emphasized economic motivations, observing that "[t]he US has sought to rally European and other allies... Beijing rallies

1 Many countries that requested the vote were not UNHRC members: Albania, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Norway, Slovakia, Sweden, and Turkey.

developing nations in need of financial support to vote alongside it at critical moments, particularly on sensitive issues such as human rights" (Zheng 2022).

These accounts highlight factors such as economic ties and security arrangements with the United States and China in explaining the vote, suggesting that China adopts an economic approach to coalition building, while the United States relies on security partnerships. However, both liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes may have their own political-institutional reasons for voting a particular way on the international scrutiny of a country's domestic human rights affairs. Additionally, countries with large Muslim populations and/or those facing their own domestic national self-determination movements might have domestic reasons for supporting or opposing the debate on the human rights situation in a Council member state.

Table 1

UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL VOTE ON DEBATE ON THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE XINJIANG UYGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION, CHINA

Yea	Abstain	Nay
Czechia	Argentina	Bolivia
Finland	Armenia	Cameroon
France	Benin	China
Germany	Brazil	Cote D'Ivoire
Honduras	Gambia	Cuba
Japan	India	Eritrea
Korea, Rep.	Libya	Gabon
Lithuania	Malawi	Indonesia
Luxembourg	Malaysia	Kazakhstan
Marshall	Mexico	Mauritania
Montenegro	Ukraine	Namibia
Netherlands		Nepal
Paraguay		Pakistan
Poland		Qatar
Somalia		Senegal
United Kingdom		Sudan
United States		United Arab Emirates
		Uzbekistan
		Venezuela

Source: United Nations.

In this article, we assess several competing explanations for countries' UNHRC votes on Xinjiang. We focus on this vote because it is a most-likely case for evaluating the importance of transnational linkages with major powers, especially linkages with China. Both the target (China) and the petitioners (a coalition of Western states, including the United States) represent distinct, emergent poles in the international system. Because China was the explicit target, the issue was extremely salient for the regime. If the BRI and Chinese debt are indeed buying influence, we would expect to see evidence of it here.

Using Bayesian model averaging, we identify three robust covariates of the UNHRC vote: liberal democratic domestic institutions, NATO membership, and Chinese arms transfers. Furthermore, we find that, in addition to its direct effect, democracy exerts a significant indirect effect through its influence on Chinese arms transfers, with less democratic countries being more likely to receive Chinese arms. Participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not a robust correlate of vote choice when accounting for Chinese arms transfers.

These findings suggest that the conventional wisdom regarding China, the BRI, and the Chinese approach to economic statecraft may overstate the role of economic linkages while understating the importance of traditional security-based factors. Arms transfers constitute both an economic and a security linkage, but previous research on Chinese foreign policy has neglected arms transfers, focusing instead on development financing, infrastructure projects, and trade relationships (Dreher et al. 2022; Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Zarpli and Zengin 2022), or emphasized China's willingness to use its position on the UNHRC to actively lobby countries to vote in alignment with Chinese positions (Pauselli, Urdínez and Merke 2023). Others focus on geopolitical alignment—"[c]ountries that have similar geopolitical interests with Beijing, evidenced by voting patterns at the United Nations, are more likely to defend China over the Uyghur question" (Zarpli and Zengin 2022, 2)—but sidestep the issue of what the sources of that alignment might be. Our contribution refocuses attention on

security linkages—both alliances and arms transfers—as sources of diplomatic leverage in US and Chinese foreign policy, respectively, and provides new evidence on the sources of Chinese support as it pertains to this specific and high-profile vote.

These findings also have implications for the UNHRC as a forum for addressing human rights conditions in an increasingly complex international system, regardless of whether it is bipolar or multipolar. Lebovic and Voeten (2006) found that in the aftermath of the Cold War, voting in the UNHRC's predecessor, the UN Human Rights Commission, was less driven by political-economic ties with major powers. Relatedly, the Commission was much more active as major power (i.e., the United States and Soviet Union) blocking of its agenda decreased. The "measured optimism" about the practical impact of UN actions on human rights (Lebovic and Voeten 2006) in the post-Cold War era may no longer be warranted due to the increasingly bi- or potentially multipolar distribution of power within the international system.

Competing Explanations

Media discussions and international relations literature offer various potential explanations for states' human rights performance generally and the Xinjiang UNHRC vote specifically. We group these explanations into three broad categories: (1) democracy, development, and domestic human rights performance; (2) domestic demographic factors; and (3) economic and security ties to major powers.

These groupings loosely correspond to grand theoretical debates that have dominated international relations scholarship in previous decades (Lake 2013). The first grouping emphasizes explanations typically associated with the liberal-institutionalist tradition, in which state behavior is shaped by both international and domestic institutional constraints and incentives, though the boundary with constructivism is a porous one. For example, democracy may influence domestic human

rights performance by placing constraints on government behavior, but it may also affect adherence to international human rights norms (Checkel 1997). The second grouping emphasizes domestic demographic factors, rooted in arguments about the roles of shared transnational identities and ideation that have been central to constructivist discourse (Katzenstein 1996). Finally, the third grouping highlights the importance of hard security relationships in shaping state interests and behavior, with bargaining leverage in international institutions understood to flow more from these types of relationships than from institutional (dis)similarity or identity/ideational factors (Wang 1999). These relationships may be particularly useful in securing support from non-democracies (Lai and Morey 2006).

Below, we outline these various theoretical arguments and the expectations they generate regarding the Xinjiang vote.

Democracy, Development, and Human Rights Performance

- *Democracy*. It is well established that liberal democracies perform best in protecting and honoring human rights (Davenport 2007). The alleged abuses in Xinjiang, ranging from arbitrary detention to forced labor, repression of religion, and even forced sterilizations and coerced abortions, are precisely the types of abuses that liberal institutions are designed to limit. Liberal democratic institutions affect not only domestic human rights performance but also voting behavior in the UNHRC, with more liberal democratic countries voting in ways that affirm human rights norms (Hug and Lukacs 2014; Koliev 2020). We use the Liberal Democracy Index produced by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project to proxy democracy (Coppedge et al. 2021). *Expectation: Liberal democracy will be positively (negatively) correlated with voting yes (no).*
- *Development*. Countries at higher levels of economic development are more likely to have political cultures that value political freedom and participation, or "post-material" values, among

which human rights are often categorized (Weizel and Inglehart 2005). Indirectly, economic development should make a country less susceptible to economic pressure and, therefore, less likely to view participation in initiatives like the BRI—and the diplomatic support (or at least the lack of criticism) for its major funder—as essential. Countries at higher levels of development may perceive lower opportunity costs for voting against China than less-developed economies with greater need for external development finance (Zhao 2020). We use the natural log of GDP per capita in current dollars from the World Bank (2023) to proxy the level of development. *Expectation: GDP per capita will be positively (negatively) correlated with voting yes (no).*

- *Human rights performance.* A country's domestic human rights performance can be interpreted as a revealed preference regarding adherence to human rights norms. Governments with stronger domestic human rights records should be more likely to support adherence to international human rights norms in multilateral organizations (Hug and Lukacs 2014). We use the V-Dem projects' physical integrity rights index, which proxies the degree to which the population is free from government abuses such as torture and extrajudicial killings (Coppedge et al. 2021). *Expectation: Human rights performance will be positively (negatively) correlated with voting yes (no).*

Demographic Factors

- *Large Muslim populations.* The program of alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang has targeted not only the Uyghur ethnic group but also members of other Turkic ethnic groups such as Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, with the common denominator being their predominantly Muslim faith (Human Rights Watch 2021). Previous studies have found evidence of "Muslim solidarity" in UN voting, with majority-Muslim member states typically voting in favor of other majority-Muslim states (Balci and Duman 2022).

States with large Muslim populations may be more likely to vote in ways that enhance scrutiny of state infringements on the practice of Islam, as voting to debate China's actions in Xinjiang would have. We include an indicator variable for those countries that are either majority Muslim or members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. *Expectation: Large Muslim populations will be positively (negatively) correlated with voting yes (no).*

- *Domestic treatment of minority ethnic groups.* If the allegations of human rights abuses are true, China is certainly not unique among UN members in persecuting and/or denying rights and equal political participation to certain ethnic minorities. The crackdown in Xinjiang occurred in response to the Kunming railway station attack, a violent assault during which 31 people were killed by extremists linked to the Uyghur separatist movement. Because separatist or autonomy-seeking movements pose a direct challenge to state sovereignty, they are often harshly repressed. Several UNHRC members face their own violent autonomy-seeking movements: the Baloch in Pakistan, India's Naxalite movement, which draws support from India's marginalized tribal groups, and Ukraine's Russian ethnic minority that, prior to the Russian invasion in 2022, had been fighting a secessionist war against Kyiv since 2014. For these regimes, China's framing of its actions in Xinjiang as a matter of domestic security may be more persuasive than for Western audiences. Countries with marginalized and persecuted minorities may be hesitant to discuss conditions in Xinjiang, fearing scrutiny of their own treatment of minority populations. We proxy these dynamics with an indicator variable that captures a) the presence of ethnic groups classified as "discriminated against" by the Ethnic Power Relations data project (Vogt et al. 2015) and/or b) the state having been involved in an armed conflict against a separatist/autonomy movement as of 2021, per the Uppsala Conflict Data program (Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg 2022). *Expectation: Governments engaged in*

discrimination and/or in conflict with minority groups will be negatively (positively) correlated with voting no (yes).

Economic and Security Ties to Major Powers

This grouping of explanations emphasizes security and economic ties with major powers—the United States and China—as influencing a country's vote choice. Rather than building a network of explicit military alliances, conventional wisdom holds that China has approached coalition-building largely through economic statecraft (Dreher et al. 2022). China has emerged as the world's largest official creditor, with extensive lending to developing and middle-income countries as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. In addition to its economic dimensions, this lending, along with the promise of future investment, is argued to confer diplomatic leverage on China over debtor countries, which has been used in the past to secure support for Chinese positions, including non-recognition of Taiwan (Ponniah 2023).

- *Trade*. Previous research suggests that countries are less likely to criticize "friends and allies," with trade relationships being a significant and obvious component of friendly relations (Terman and Voeten 2018, 1; Zarpli and Zengin 2022). Flores-Macías and Kreps (2013) find that as states trade more with China, their foreign policy preferences are more likely to converge with those of China. As the world's two largest economies, the United States and China have extensive trade relationships with many members of the UNHRC, accounting for, on average, 8.1% and 12.8% of member exports, respectively. We use export shares for 2021 from the Observatory of Economic Complexity to proxy trade dependence on the United States and China (Hidalgo 2021). *Expectation: High dependence on these markets would make countries more (United States) and less (China) likely to vote in favor of debate.*
- *Debt leverage*. One prominent narrative holds that China is using "debt trap diplomacy," whereby its loans to foreign governments

can be used to make those governments subservient to Chinese interests. There is evidence that lending makes recipient countries more likely to vote with lenders in the UN General Assembly (Dreher, Nunnenkamp, and Thiele 2008), and that recipient country voting in the UN Security Council affects subsequent access to IMF and World Bank loans (Vreeland and Dreher 2014). We use outstanding levels of debt to China as a share of GDP for the most recent year (2017) for which comprehensive data are available (Horn, Reinhart, and Trebesch 2021) to proxy potential Chinese debt leverage.[2] We also include the country's current account balance as a percentage of GDP in October 2022 to proxy that country's susceptibility to balance-of-payments crises (World Bank 2023), as current account deficits would make a country more vulnerable to debt-trap diplomacy and potential external leverage. *Expectation: Higher levels of outstanding debt to China will be negatively (positively) correlated with voting yes (no).*

- *Arms sales and transfers.* Sullivan, Tessman, and Li (2011) posit that arms transfers allow the arms-exporting states to shape the foreign policy choices of weaker recipient states in line with the exporting states' interests. Most countries cannot sustain large military-industrial complexes and are thus dependent on transfers and sales from major industrial economies. We include the log-transformed volume of arms transfers from both the United States and China from 2012 to 2022[3] to assess whether arms exports from these major producers and exporters shaped voting behavior. Data are from SIPRI (2023). *Expectation: Larger arms transfers from the United States (China) will be associated with an increased likelihood of voting yes (no).*
- *Collective security arrangements.* The United States has collective

2 Data for two observations (Gambia, Somalia) were not available and imputed from Aiddata's database on Chinese lending (Dreher et al. 2022). These data were aggregated for the period 2000-2017.

3 The longer time window is used to account for the clumpy nature of arms transfers, which for many smaller economies are highly variable on a year-to-year basis.

security arrangements with countries across Europe, Asia, and Latin America. We include an indicator for NATO membership, as well as an indicator for non-NATO countries with which the United States has defense pacts, to proxy US ally status. China does not have a similar network of explicit cooperative security arrangements.[4] *Expectation: Countries with formal security arrangements with the United States will be more likely to vote yes.*

- *Belt and Road Participation*. We include an indicator for BRI participation based on whether the country has a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese government regarding formal participation as of 2022 (GFDC 2022). *Expectation: Belt and Road participants will be more likely to vote no.*

Descriptive statistics for these variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR VARIABLES USED IN THE ANALYSIS

Variable	Source	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Vote	United Nations	47	0.96	0.88	0.00	2.00
Belt and Road Participation	Green Finance and Development Center	47	0.72	0.45	0.00	1.00
Current Account Surplus/Deficit (%)	World Bank	47	-0.91	7.66	-14.10	24.50
Direct Chinese Loans/Aid (Proportion of GDP, 2000-2017)	Horn, Reinhart, and Trebesch; Dreher et al.	46	0.06	0.18	0.00	1.19
Liberal Democracy Index, 2021	V-Dem	47	0.41	0.27	0.01	0.83
ln GDP per capita, 2021	World Bank	47	8.77	1.47	5.96	11.59
NATO Membership	NATO	47	0.21	0.41	0.00	1.00
Non-NATO US Security Arrangements	Correlates of War	47	0.17	0.38	0.00	1.00
Organization for Islamic Cooperation/Majority Muslim Status	OIC, World Population Review	47	0.38	0.49	0.00	1.00
Physical Integrity Rights Index, 2021	V-Dem	47	0.73	0.26	0.14	0.99
State-led Discrimination/ Separatist Conflict Incidence, 2020/2021	Vogt et al., Davies, Pettersson, and Oberg	47	0.19	0.40	0.00	1.00
Exports to China as % of Total Exports, 2021	Hidalgo	46	12.77	13.23	0.19	56.8
Exports to US as % of Total Exports, 2021	Hidalgo	46	8.10	13.25	0.71	76.2
ln Chinese Arms Transfers, 2012-2022	SIPRI	46	1.46	2.29	0	8.94
ln US Arms Transfers, 2012-2022	SIPRI	46	3.49	3.16	0	8.83

4 China's only mutual defense pact is with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Model Selection and Results

The previous section identified 14 potential covariates of the Xinjiang vote. Given that the various theoretical expectations are all plausible and the number of potential covariates is large relative to the number of observations (n = 47), we use Bayesian model averaging (BMA) to guide model specification (Raftery, Madigan, and Hoeting 1997; see Table 3). The purpose of BMA is to provide a robustness check by identifying variables that are consistently correlated with the outcome of interest (the UNHRC vote) regardless of which other explanatory variables are included. This approach reduces concerns that the final models' results might be sensitive to different combinations of variables, which could produce materially different outcomes. BMA estimates 2^k models, where k is the number of potential covariates; in this analysis, the 14 potential explanatory variables may be combined in 16,384 ways.

The posterior inclusion probability (PIP) is the mean of all posterior probabilities for all specifications that include a particular variable. It can be interpreted as the probability that the variable is robust (i.e., offers significant explanatory power) across potential model specifications. BMA is like other forms of sensitivity analysis, using an exhaustive set of combinations of potential covariates to identify those that are most robust across specifications (Sala-i-Martin 1997; Hegre and Sambanis 2006). The results of the BMA analysis inform model selection.

Three variables emerge as more likely than not (PIP > 0.5) to be robust covariates of the UNHRC vote: Chinese arms transfers, liberal democracy, and NATO membership[5] all have PIP scores greater than 0.5. Variables intended to proxy vulnerability to trade dependence on China and the United States, BRI participation, balance-of-payments crises, debt exposure to China, the country's domestic human rights

5 Non-NATO collective security arrangements with the United States returned a PIP score of 0.18, indicating these arrangements are not likely to be robustly associated with UNHRC vote.

Table 3

BAYESIAN MODEL AVERAGING ESTIMATES, POTENTIAL COVARIATES OF UNHRC XINJIANG VOTE

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-score	PIP
ln Chinese Arms Transfers, 2012-2022	-0.151	0.041	-3.69	0.99
Liberal Democracy Score, 2021	1.305	0.599	2.18	0.91
NATO Member (as of 2022)	0.336	0.358	0.94	0.56
Exports to China as % of Total Exports, 2021	-0.005	0.007	-0.65	0.37
Belt and Road Participant (as of 2022)	-0.114	0.218	-0.52	0.28
US Collective Security Arrangements (~NATO) (as of 2022)	0.060	0.161	0.37	0.18
Exports to US as % of Total Exports, 2021	0.001	0.003	0.26	0.12
Physical Integrity Rights, 2021	-0.007	0.159	-0.04	0.09
ln GDP per capita, 2021	0.000	0.022	0.00	0.08
Majority Muslim Country/OIC Member (as of 2022)	-0.011	0.081	-0.14	0.08
EPR Discriminated and Self-Isolating Groups/ UCDP Territorial Armed Conflict (as of 2022)	-0.009	0.069	-0.13	0.08
Current Account Surplus/Deficit, 2022	0.000	0.003	-0.11	0.08
Outstanding Chinese Debt as % of GDP, 2017	0.012	0.165	0.07	0.08
ln US Arms Transfers, 2012-2022	0.001	0.008	0.10	0.08

Note: The 14 variables yield 16,384 unique combinations of covariates. The inclusion of the debt, trade, and arms transfers variables resulted in dropping China and the United States from the BMA analysis.

Source: Authors' calculations.

performance, treatment of minority ethnic groups, majority Muslim status, and level of development are not robust covariates of the country's UNHRC vote. Nor are arms transfers from the United States.

We then model each country's UNHRC vote as a function of the three robust (PIP > 0.5) variables (Table 4) using different estimators: ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, ordered logistic regression, and ordered probit regression. Ordered logistic and probit models are superior choices given the nature of the outcome variable (ordered discrete choices from a set of universal and mutually exclusive options). We also use OLS regression because it facilitates causal mediation

analysis. The results are consistent across estimators, with all variables having statistically and substantively significant effects.

Table 4
REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF XINJIANG VOTE IN THE UNHRC, 2022

	(1)	(2)	(3)
VARIABLES	OLS	Ordered Logit	Ordered Probit
NATO Member	0.502***	17.696***	5.675***
	(0.164)	(0.828)	(0.388)
Liberal Democracy Score	1.429***	6.910***	3.759***
	(0.392)	(2.440)	(1.214)
ln Chinese Arms Transfers	-0.156***	-0.893***	-0.493***
	(0.041)	(0.337)	(0.165)
Constant	0.500**		
	(0.232)		
Cutpoint 1		0.880	0.402
		(0.844)	(0.491)
Cutpoint 2		3.822**	2.021***
		(1.527)	(0.735)
Observations	46	46	46
R-squared	0.702		

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

NATO membership perfectly predicts casting a yea vote. Liberal democracy scores are positively associated with the probability of voting yea. A one-standard-deviation increase in the liberal democracy score is associated with a 62% increase in the likelihood of voting yea from baseline (based on Table 4, Model 2). Chinese arms transfers also perfectly predict a nay vote or abstention: no country receiving any arms from China cast a yea vote. At zero Chinese arms transfers, the baseline probability of casting a nay vote is 0.21; at the 75th percentile value (3.25, corresponding to Bolivia's transfers over the previous decade), the probability rises to 0.57. We find no effect for US arms transfers.

Chinese arms transfers appear to affect the vote at the extensive margin. Substituting a dummy variable for whether the country received any Chinese arms (Table 5) slightly improves model fit, and the same substantively and statistically significant relationships are recovered.

Table 5
REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF XINJIANG VOTE IN THE UNHRC, 2022, DUMMY INDICATOR FOR ARMS TRANSFERS

VARIABLES	(1) OLS	(2) Ordered Logit	(3) Ordered Probit
NATO Member	0.429***	17.811***	5.859***
	(0.158)	(0.812)	(0.392)
Liberal Democracy Score	1.463***	6.654***	3.724***
	(0.380)	(2.194)	(1.146)
Any Chinese Arms Transfers	-0.790***	-2.942***	-1.759***
	(0.191)	(0.812)	(0.428)
Constant	0.549**		
	(0.244)		
Cutpoint 1		0.838	0.385
		(0.837)	(0.491)
Cutpoint 2		3.683**	1.977***
		(1.431)	(0.717)
Observations	46	46	46
R-squared	0.718		

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Chinese arms transfers tend to flow to less democratic countries (mean libdemAnyChineseArms = 0.29, libdem~AnyChineseArms = 0.48, t = 2.48). Part of the effect of democracy may thus be mediated by Chinese arms transfers. To assess this possibility, we conduct causal mediation analysis (Imai et al. 2011). The analysis (see Appendix, Table A1) indicates that the effect of democracy is 21% larger (relative to Table 4, Model 1) when the indirect effect mediated by Chinese arms transfers is accounted for, indicating that democracy affected UNHRC

vote choice not just directly but also via Chinese arms transfers flowing disproportionately to less democratic countries.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have assessed a variety of potential explanations for UN Human Rights Council member states' votes on whether to debate human rights conditions in Xinjiang. Our analysis found robust evidence linking three factors to vote choice: democracy, Chinese arms transfers, and NATO membership. The effect of democracy is partially mediated by Chinese arms transfers[6], which aligns with previous research highlighting the influence of democracy on voting in the UNHRC (Hug and Lukács 2014). However, contrary to Hug and Lukács, we found no evidence that human rights performance, as proxied by either physical integrity rights or state-led discrimination against minority ethnic groups, affected this specific vote.

Thus, our analysis supports interpreting the vote as a reflection of the broader competition between the United States and China, but it only partially confirms the conventional wisdom about the two countries' approaches to mobilizing coalitions in international institutions. Apart from democracy, the most reliable predictors of voting behavior were US military alliances and Chinese arms transfers. US security relationships appear to matter in a tiered way, with stronger relationships with NATO partners being consequential, while other types of security arrangements are mixed. Japan and South Korea, which have mutual defense treaties with the United States, voted yea. But the security

6 NATO members are also much more democratic than their non-NATO counterparts (mean libdemNATO = 0.70, libdem~NATO = 0.33, t = 4.68), so it is plausible that the effect of democracy is operating also through NATO membership. However, it is problematic to assume NATO membership is a function of democracy and not vice versa. Mediation analysis using seemingly unrelated regression indicates that the indirect effect of democracy could be 55.6% of the total effect when both the NATO and Chinese arms transfers channels are modeled (see Appendix, Table A2).

relationship with the US of many Latin American countries was not associated with vote choice.

Our results contrast with much of the received wisdom on the sources of China's support in multilateral institutions, particularly the UN. Arms transfers and hard security linkages have been de-emphasized relative to development financing, infrastructure investments, and trade (Dreher et al. 2022; Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Zarpli and Zengin 2022), or China's position on the UNHRC as a platform from which to lobby countries to vote in alignment with Chinese positions (Pauselli, Urdínez, and Merke 2023). Our analysis indicates that, at least in this specific instance, arms transfers played a key and previously unrecognized role.

The vote broke down along (anti-)democratic lines, and the effect of democracy was both direct and indirect. However, neither BRI participation nor Chinese debt leverage appears to have shaped China's ability to build a coalition in the UNHRC; neither variable was robustly associated with vote choice across the thousands of models that informed the Bayesian model averaging reported in Table 3. Instead, it appears that China's arms exports mattered. These findings caution scholars against overemphasizing China's economic diplomacy at the expense of its security relationships when explaining its foreign policy approaches.

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Appendix for Chinese Arms Transfers, Xinjiang, and the UNHRC Vote

Causal Mediation Analysis

The causal mediation analysis was conducted using the methods described in Hicks and Tingley (2011). We assess the indirect effect of democracy operating through Chinese arms transfers, which flow disproportionately to less democratic states.

Table A1
FIRST STAGE: OLS ESTIMATE OF EFFECT OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDEX SCORE ON CHINESE ARMS TRANSFERS

VARIABLES	(1) Chinese Arms Transfers Dummy
Liberal Democracy Score	-3.16***
	(1.20)
Constant	0.587
	0.606
Observations	46
R-squared	0.10

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

SECOND STAGE: FULL OLS MODEL

VARIABLES	(1) OLS
NATO Member	0.708***
	(0.234)
Liberal Democracy Score	1.227**
	(0.469)
Chinese Arms Transfers Dummy	-0.584**
	(0.218)
Constant	0.726**
	(0.307)
Observations	46
R-squared	0.718

Robust standard errors in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

MEDIATION ANALYSIS

Effect	Mean	95% Confidence Interval	
ACME	0.402	0.024	0.971
Direct Effect	1.480	0.792	2.197
Total Effect	1.882	1.138	2.548
Proportion Mediated	0.212	0.158	0.354

Supplemental Mediation Analysis

We conduct supplementary causal mediation analysis using seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) techniques as described in Preacher and Hayes (2008) to assess the potential for liberal democracy being mediated by both Chinese arms transfers and NATO membership. Note that the estimated coefficients in model 3 match those reported in Table 4 (Model 1), though the standard errors are smaller as robust errors cannot be estimated in the SUR framework. The very low/zero correlations between the residuals of the models indicate SUR does not significantly outperform OLS estimates.

Table A2
SEEMINGLY UNRELATED REGRESSION (SUR) ESTIMATES OF NATO MEMBERSHIP, CHINESE ARMS TRANSFERS, AND THE UNHRC VOTE

VARIABLES	(1) NATO Membership	(2) Any Chinese Arms Transfers	(3) UNHRC Vote
Liberal Democracy Score	0.905***	-0.641**	1.463***
	(0.192)	(0.253)	(0.325)
NATO Membership			0.429**
			(0.208)
Any Chinese Arms Transfers			-0.790***
			(0.158)
Constant	-0.160*	0.616***	0.549***
	(0.095)	(0.124)	(0.160)
Observations	46	46	46
R-squared	0.325	0.122	0.718

Standard errors in parentheses.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Calculation of Mediated Effect:

Absolute value([nato]_b[.905]*[vote]_b[1.463]+[any chinese]_b[-0.641]*[vote]_b[-0.790]) = 1.830

Percent of Effect Mediated (Mediated Effect/Total Effect (Mediated + Liberal Democracy Direct Effect)

1.830/(1.830+1.227)= 0.556

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Contextualizing the North Korean Submarine Threat[1]

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Abstract

This study examines the developments and regional implications of North Korea's submarine fleet. Since the mid-2010s, the Korean People's Army Navy (KPAN) has undergone partial modernization, focusing on building vessels capable of launching nuclear missiles, including the Hero Kim Kun Ok "tactical nuclear attack submarine," Patrol Ship No. 661 corvette, "underwater nuclear attack drones," and sea-launch capable, nuclear-armed ballistic and cruise missiles. While KPAN submarines remain limited in their capabilities, and the KPAN itself faces constraints in fully utilizing its capabilities, these developments warrant increased concern from the perspectives of national and regional security, as well as transport safety and security. The article first explores North Korea's defense planning doctrine and the rationale for its submarine program, followed by an analysis of recent developments in North Korea's submarine fleet. It then assesses the KPAN's submarine fleet in terms of readiness and operational doctrines. Finally, the paper discusses the regional implications and challenges posed to the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Keywords: North Korea, military, maritime security, transport security, submarines

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Introduction

Over the past decade, North Korea has aggressively sought to enhance and diversify the nuclear strike capabilities of the Korean People's Army (KPA), introducing a wide range of ballistic and cruise missiles for strategic and tactical strikes against the United States (US), Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK). While the KPA Strategic Force (KPASF) and KPA Ground Force are responsible for most of North Korea's strategic and tactical arsenals, Pyongyang is also developing sea-based nuclear strike capabilities. In September 2023, North Korea unveiled and commissioned the Hero Kim Kun Ok "tactical nuclear attack submarine" at the Sinpo South Shipyard. This submarine is the first operational class in North Korea capable of launching ballistic and cruise missiles, expanding the Korean People's Army Navy (KPAN) missions and diversifying Pyongyang's nuclear strike options. Although based on outdated Soviet technologies, the vessel represents a significant step in the KPAN's modernization, warranting increased attention in the contexts of national defense and transport safety and security.

Historically, North Korea has paid limited attention to the KPAN's readiness, but it has consistently viewed submarines as critical assets for guerrilla, reconnaissance, and amphibious operations in littoral zones, proving more effective than surface vessels (Hinata-Yamaguchi 2021, 143-146). Since the 2010s, North Korea has expanded the missions and capabilities of the KPAN submarine fleet, taking substantive steps to construct vessels designated as the Sinpo-class ballistic missile submarines (SSBs) and developing a series of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). Moreover, the "five-year plan for the development of the defense science and the weapon system," announced in January 2021, included plans to construct nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and SLBMs with intercontinental range (Rodong Sinmun 2021).

Although recent developments in submarine capabilities are new, North Korea's ambitions likely date back to the 1960s, when it began

its nuclear weapons program and recognized the strategic utility of US and Soviet SSB/SSBNs. North Korea's long-standing pursuit of SSB/SSBNs and SLBMs is less about naval modernization and more about diversifying the KPA's nuclear strike options through asymmetric means. Thus, while these developments do not signify a complete shift in North Korea's naval strategy away from littoral operations using light surface vessels and submarines, they do indicate an expansion of the KPAN's missions, raising new questions about how to address the threats posed by Pyongyang.

The purpose of this article is to examine the developments and regional implications of the KPAN submarine fleet. First, it explores the rationale behind the modernization of the KPAN submarine fleet within the framework of North Korea's defense plans. Second, it assesses recent developments in North Korea's submarine fleet, related infrastructure, and weaponry. The third section evaluates the KPAN submarine fleet's readiness, including a review of operational and tactical doctrines. Finally, the fourth section discusses the regional implications and challenges for the US, Japan, and the ROK. The article concludes that, although the recent advancements in the KPAN submarine fleet and its submarine-launched strike capabilities are still nascent, the long-term prospects for North Korea's submarine capabilities are substantial enough to warrant increased attention from both practitioners and scholars in states where North Korea poses a threat.

North Korea's Defense Plans and Modernization of the Submarine Fleet

To understand North Korea's recent efforts to develop the KPAN's submarine fleet, it is essential to first examine Pyongyang's national defense strategy and planning. Since the division of the Korean Peninsula and the founding of its government, North Korea's strategic aim has been to achieve a united Korea under its own terms. Pyongyang

has long believed that the KPA plays a crucial role in this unification process and that the KPA must be built and maintained in a self-reliant manner. In the 1960s, North Korea pursued KPA readiness through its defense planning doctrine, known as *dangui gunsa roseon* ("military lines of the party"), which involved the establishment of a cadre army, the modernization of the entire military, the arming of the populace, and the fortification of the entire country.[2] This doctrine aims to simultaneously enhance the KPA's readiness and ensure the military's unwavering loyalty to the regime. However, this dual objective has ironically led to perennial dilemmas, as compromises between military effectiveness and regime security have been driven by path-dependent politics and fears over regime stability (Hinata-Yamaguchi 2021, 122-131).

Additionally, the scarcity of resources and technological shortcomings have exacerbated these issues, resulting in inefficiencies within the North Korean military-industrial complex. These challenges have undermined cost-effective development and, more significantly, created serious imbalances between force structure and operational readiness (Hinata-Yamaguchi 2021, 169-170). These problems are evident in the KPA's inventory, particularly within the KPAN and the KPA Air and Air Defense Force (KPAAAF), which have been neglected over the years, leaving them outdated and lacking adequate infrastructure.

Since its inception as a coast guard organization known as the Maritime Security Force in 1946 and its later evolution into a defense institution, the KPAN's inventory has been composed almost entirely of light vessels designed for coastal operations. The KPAN's surface fleet includes only corvettes, frigates, patrol vessels, and torpedo boats. In recent years, North Korea has commissioned the Amnok- and Tuman-class corvettes, which feature enhanced stealth capabilities and

2 North Korea often uses the terms *dangeui gunsa roseon* ("military lines of the party") or *jawijeok gunsa roseon* ("line of self-reliant defense"), but foreign media and writings often refer to it as the *sadae gunsa roseon* ("four grand military lines" or "four-point military guidelines").

can launch nuclear cruise missiles (Zwirko 2024).

The submarine fleet primarily consists of 90-ton Yugo-class, 130-ton Yeono-class, and 370-ton Sango I/II-class miniature submarines, along with several Whiskey and Romeo-class attack submarines acquired in the 1960s and 1970s. North Korea has also been developing the new Sinpo-class submarines capable of launching ballistic and cruise missiles (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2024, 283). As for armaments, aside from the recently acquired ballistic and cruise missiles, the KPAN's torpedoes and anti-ship/aircraft weaponry are largely legacy systems of Chinese and Soviet origin (Yoo et al. 2013, 143-145).

Table 1
NORTH KOREAN SUBMARINE FLEET CHARACTERISTICS

Type	Date	Displacement (ton)	Propulsion	Mission Set	Armament
Hero Kim Kun Ok (Sinpo-C)	2010s	3,000	Diesel-electric	Ballistic/cruise missile attacks	SLBM SLCM Torpedoes
8.24 Yongung (Sinpo-B)	2010s	3,000	Diesel-electric	Experimental	SLBM Torpedoes
Sango I/II	1990s	370	Diesel-electric	Attack Reconnaissance Infiltration	Torpedoes Naval mines
Romeo	1970s	1,830	Diesel	Attack Reconnaissance	Torpedoes Naval mines
Whiskey	1960s	1,340	Diesel-electric	Attack Reconnaissance	Torpedoes Naval mines
Yono	1960s	90	Diesel	Infiltration	Torpedoes Naval mines
Yugo	1960s	130	Diesel	Reconnaissance	Torpedoes Naval mines

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies (2024); Hinata-Yamaguchi (2021); Nuclear Threat Initiative (2024). Note: there are many unknowns, with the above information based on estimates and informed speculation.

It is easy to find fault with North Korea's defense planning, particularly in light of its economic and technological deficiencies, with poor planning to strengthen the navy being a particularly obvious example. However, much of this stems from the fact that, as a matter of defense planning culture, North Korea has never prioritized the modernization or expansion of the KPAN for strategic and operational reasons. Historically, North Korea has focused on essential capabilities such as missile strikes, special operations, ground warfare, cyber, and cognitive warfare, while the air and naval domains have been given modest importance. Additionally, much of the KPA's equipment consists of customized versions of Chinese or Soviet platforms, with even the newest systems lagging at least one generation behind modern technological standards, and the rest being entirely antiquated. Although these shortcomings can be partly explained by North Korea's operational art, there are also strategic and structural factors. For instance, unlike China, Japan, or the ROK, North Korea's international trade network is limited, making it less sensitive to issues such as the stability of sea lines of communication beyond its immediate periphery. This reduces the need for a blue- or green-water navy and instead incentivizes a focus on anti-ship, amphibious, and guerrilla capabilities in littoral zones.

Developments in the KPAN: Shift or Diversification?

Despite slow progress in KPAN readiness, North Korea has been working to modernize its naval assets since the 2010s. On the surface, the most straightforward explanation for North Korea's efforts is the need to upgrade the KPAN fleet. Although the KPAN maintains a fleet of 71 submarines and over 376 surface combatants, the vast majority are small, light-duty vessels based on pre-1960s technological standards (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2024). These outdated

vessels not only have limited effectiveness but are also costly to maintain. For North Korea, maintaining a large navy has thus yielded diminishing returns while increasing liabilities, driving the need to modernize its inventory where feasible.

However, North Korea's naval modernization appears to be about more than just renewing its fleet. On the "Day of the Navy" holiday in August 2023, Kim Jong Un stated that the KPAN "will be provided with new means of arms according to the policy of the extension of strategic nuclear operation," suggesting that nuclear strike capabilities and operations will be central to North Korea's naval strategies (Zwirko 2023). Kim's statement does not indicate a major shift in North Korea's naval strategy or planning, as capabilities based on light vessels for littoral operations remain in place, albeit with some refinements. Instead, the KPAN's operations now include nuclear strike capabilities in addition to traditional littoral operations, driven by two key rationales.

The first motive is the diversification of strike options. Since the 2010s, North Korea has been working to acquire mobile missile launch systems, including transporter-erector-launchers (TELs), railway carriages, submarines, pontoons, and surface vessels. The main goal is to develop capabilities for both first and second strike, but also to evade detection and enable surprise attacks, complicating opponents' preemptive strike capabilities. Additionally, the push for sea-based nuclear strike capabilities is bolstered by the need for strike options that operate offshore in case of deadlocks on land and limited control of the air domain.

The second motive, closely related to the first, is the capability to launch attacks from the sea using cruise and ballistic missiles. Naval strike capabilities have evolved significantly over the past century, achieving greater accuracy, range, speed, and lethality (Speller 2024, 161). While seaborne strikes are typically executed by maneuvering platforms closer to their targets in open seas, North Korea's operational concept appears to focus on gaining mobile and less detectable means

of executing strikes from within its own maritime periphery. Despite limitations in the KPAN's readiness, seaborne strikes remain a viable option for North Korea to conduct nuclear attacks (and secure a second-strike capability, if necessary) from the eastern coast of the Korean Peninsula—a submarine-friendly environment suitable for targeting areas near the Japanese archipelago or farther into the Pacific Ocean.

Submarines, therefore, emerge as the platform of choice, meeting all operational requirements. For North Korea, submarines, though expensive, are still a cost-effective option for littoral guerrilla attacks, amphibious operations, and strategic and tactical strikes. While Pyongyang is also developing other platforms, such as the Patrol Ship No. 661 corvette and "underwater nuclear attack drones," these are significantly outweighed by submarines in terms of commitment and development. This preference is not only due to North Korea's operational and tactical doctrines, which emphasize asymmetric warfare, but also because of a strong belief in submarines' proven effectiveness, exemplified by the sinking of the ROK Navy Cheonan in 2010 and numerous maritime infiltration operations into the South. The development of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) essentially aims to merge the asymmetric advantages of submarines with potent strike capabilities. Thus, for Pyongyang, acquiring submarine platforms and accompanying missile capabilities is not a broad reorientation or wholesale modernization of the navy but rather a diversification of submarine use within the framework of North Korea's broader military strategic and operational doctrines.

Developments in North Korea's Submarine Fleet

North Korea's efforts to modernize its submarine fleet began in the mid-2010s, with indications that it was constructing new submarines

capable of conducting nuclear strikes. In the fall of 2016, analysts such as Joe Bermudez noted increased activity at the Sinpo South Shipyard, which is operated by the Maritime Research Institute of the Academy of National Defense Science (Bermudez 2016). While various speculations and reports circulated about the nature of the new vessels, the actual capabilities developed remained largely unknown.

The developments in North Korea's submarine fleet over the past decade can be categorized into four main areas. First, regarding the vessels, a key milestone was the construction and commissioning of the Hero Kim Kun Ok in September 2023. Although the exact specifications are unclear, the vessel is largely based on the Soviet Romeo-class diesel-electric attack submarine and features ten missile hatches. Of these ten hatches, four appear designed for either the Pukguksong-series SLBM or the SLBM variant of the Hwasong-11S, while the remaining six are intended for the Hwasal-series SLCM.

The Hero Kim Kun Ok represents the culmination of North Korea's decade-long efforts to modernize its submarine fleet, either expanding it or replacing older vessels from the Romeo-class. In the mid-2010s, North Korea began constructing a new class of submarines capable of launching SLBMs and SLCMs, later identified as the Sinpo-class. North Korea seems to have modified the Sinpo-class multiple times, resulting in several variants, including the Sinpo-B (Gorae) and the 8.24 Yongung experimental platform, before constructing and commissioning the Sinpo-C, which will officially be named the Hero Kim Kun Ok (Panda 2017; Chung, Kim, and Jung 2021; Yu 2024).

North Korea also plans to develop nuclear-powered submarines as outlined in its five-year military plan, although the specifications and construction progress remain unclear (Hinata-Yamaguchi 2021, 143). Nuclear-powered submarines offer superior speed, endurance, and stealth, making them more suitable than diesel-electric submarines for area denial, sea control, and strikes (including second-strike capability) from distant areas. However, given the technological complexities of nuclear submarines, it is likely to take a significant amount of time

before such a vessel is constructed or commissioned, given North Korea's current submarine technologies. A potential wildcard is the new North Korea-Russia military cooperation relationship from 2023, which could contribute to Pyongyang's SSN/SSBN program through Moscow's sharing of hardware and software, although the status of this possibility remains unknown.

North Korea is also making steady, incremental progress in submarine-launched missile systems (Japan Ministry of Defense 2023). Pyongyang's first SLBM test launch occurred in December 2014 with the Pukguksong-1, but it was not until August 2016 that the missile underwent a fully successful test. Since then, North Korea has developed upgraded variants of the Pukguksong series as well as an SLBM variant of the KN-23 (based on the Russian 9K720 Iskander) capable of terminal "pull-up" maneuvers. For SLCMs, North Korea first tested the Hwasal-2 in January 2022. Although the readiness state of North Korea's SLBMs and SLCMs remains difficult to assess in terms of actual launches from submarines, various tests conducted since August 2016 (e.g., from underwater barges or test stands) suggest that initial development hurdles have been cleared, indicating that these assets will be deployed alongside the Hero Kim Kun Ok and future submarines in the near- to medium-term future (Panda 2021).

Another critical area of development is infrastructure, including shipyards, piers, and weapons depots, particularly around Sinpo. The Sinpo South Shipyard handles construction and heavy maintenance, while facilities on Mayang Island, adjacent to Sinpo, serve as the operational base for the KPAN submarine fleet (Bermudez and Cha 2021). While there appears to be little significant expansion or refurbishment of facilities around the vessel basins, signs of incremental developments or at least ongoing maintenance are evident. For instance, there seem to be more roads leading to underground facilities and several camouflaged sites, suggesting reconfiguration of logistical capacities for the new class of submarines and the establishment of anti-air defense sites. Additionally, North Korea has announced plans

to build a new naval base to accommodate "large surface warships and submarines" (Pyongyang Times 2024). Although the location and details of the planned base are unknown, it appears intended to align with current KPAN developments and plans, particularly for the Eastern Fleet.

While developments in physical "hardware" are somewhat observable, much less is known about the "software" aspects, such as education and training. The construction and commissioning of new vessels, along with submarine-launched strike capabilities, necessitate major changes and upgrades in KPAN's education and training programs. Given the limited number of SLBM tests and the seemingly slow construction of the new submarine class, it is likely that Pyongyang has made some necessary reforms, but not all. Since North Korea is in the early stages of advancing its submarine-launch capabilities, further developments are anticipated, which will likely lead to enhanced competence and the formulation of new operational and tactical doctrines that will need to be tested and refined.

It is important to recognize that enhancing naval capabilities involves years, even decades, of planning and execution. Therefore, the developments mentioned above have been gradual, reflecting a long-term strategy, considering that the construction of submarine-launched missiles and new submarines predates the five-year military plan that began in 2021. In this context, the recent developments are relatively early signs of North Korea's submarine fleet upgrade plans materializing, with more advancements expected in the coming years.

Evaluating North Korea's Submarine Fleet

The combination of the points discussed thus far suggests that, once operational, the new classes of KPAN submarines would amplify the threat posed by North Korea. Although North Korea has built only one vessel of the newest submarine class, much will depend on how

Pyongyang further diversifies and expands the KPAN fleet, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Nevertheless, the fact that North Korea is steadily developing and operationalizing more modern submarine capabilities with the potential for nuclear strikes is a growing concern for the US, Japan, and the ROK. However, the effectiveness and opportunities offered by submarines come with significant technological, operational, and resource challenges (Till 2018, 158-159). There are numerous hurdles North Korea must overcome before its submarine forces can have a meaningful impact.

First, even the KPAN's newest, in-development submarines will remain technologically outdated. The Sinpo-class submarines and their variants are based on the Soviet 1,830-ton Romeo-class and, to some extent, the 2,794-ton Golf-class, which were first constructed in the 1950s. While some features have been expanded, improved, and modernized, these upgrades are likely rudimentary and insufficient to enhance their operational effectiveness compared to modern counterparts. The recently commissioned Hero Kim Kun Ok illustrates this point. Although much remains unknown about the vessel's critical instruments and equipment, its exterior suggests limitations in maneuverability, speed, and stealth.

Second, the KPAN's submarine fleet suffers from significant vulnerabilities due to deficiencies in anti-submarine and countermine warfare capabilities. While some KPAN vessels are equipped with sonar systems, many rely on outdated Soviet technologies with limited accuracy and range. Similarly, the KPAN has few aircraft for anti-submarine and countermine operations, hindering its ability to promptly detect, track, and neutralize enemy submarines and naval mines. Moreover, such shortfalls limit North Korea's conducting joint training between anti-submarine warfare units and the submarine fleet. These weaknesses mean that even if North Korean submarines are technically capable of conducting seaborne attacks, they are highly vulnerable to detection and neutralization in open seas and when departing from port—particularly by the US, Japanese, and ROK navies, which possess credible anti-

submarine and mine warfare capabilities. Consequently, this will limit the survivability and operational range of KPAN vessels.

Third, there are questions about North Korea's submarine-related infrastructure. Despite the number of bases, depots, and other installations, satellite images reveal that many of the buildings and equipment are obsolete or nearing obsolescence (Bermudez and Cha 2021). Even though North Korea has numerous anti-air systems for protection against airstrikes, it lacks adequate defenses against missile attacks, leaving key sites such as Mayang-do vulnerable. Furthermore, North Korea's geographic position on the Korean Peninsula, with the ROK to the south, means that the two KPAN fleets—one operating from each coast—are separated by the peninsula, with limited means to coordinate units or construct and posture vessels in a balanced manner.

For North Korea, significant challenges lie in operating its submarine fleet under realistic conditions. Logistics is a major concern, as the effectiveness of navies relies heavily on the replenishment capabilities of ports and bases, as well as at sea (Vego 2020, 178). North Korea has long struggled with logistical shortfalls, particularly the lack of fuel, which is critical for inherently fuel-intensive naval forces. While this creates severe problems in wartime, the immediate impacts are arguably just as serious, severely compromising the frequency and duration of training, exercises, and patrol operations at sea—shortcomings that would adversely affect warfighting readiness. Although some training could be conducted on land using various simulation hardware, the quality of KPA training aids is typically rudimentary, offering limited benefits in improving and sustaining personnel aptitudes (Hinata-Yamaguchi 2021, 164-165). Regarding education and training doctrines, while it is likely that Pyongyang has studied modern submarine warfare theories, translating this knowledge into practical readiness has been difficult due to technological and logistical constraints.

There are also significant personnel challenges, as operating submarines requires highly specialized operators and technicians.

Beyond technical skills, personnel must also possess the physical and psychological resilience needed to endure high-stress work in extremely confined spaces. Moreover, handling sensitive platforms like submarines is reserved for individuals with technological proficiency and unwavering political loyalty, which in North Korea is heavily influenced by personal and familial histories of allegiance to the regime. Taken together, these factors raise questions about North Korea's ability to field enough suitable submarine personnel to operate a larger fleet.

Pyongyang is likely aware of the logistical and personnel challenges it faces. North Korea has various military education institutions for KPA personnel, including submariners, and it can be assumed that Pyongyang is also upgrading its submarine training and warfighting doctrines. In terms of logistics, North Korea is likely cognizant of its bottlenecks and may find ways to circumvent shortfalls in fuel and supplies. However, as North Korea advances its submarine capabilities, it simultaneously raises the bar for both logistics and personnel, inevitably slowing the pace of operationalization.

Operational and Tactical Concepts and Doctrines

Despite the persistent issues in readiness, North Korea will likely continue advancing the KPAN submarine fleet and seaborne strike capabilities. While analysts will naturally focus on technological advancements, an equally important question is how Pyongyang envisions and utilizes these platforms at the operational and tactical levels. Although the details of North Korea's operational and tactical concepts and doctrines are closely guarded, the developments and limitations of the KPAN submarine fleet offer some insights into how these capabilities might be employed.

Strategically, asymmetric warfare will continue to be a core component of North Korea's military activities, relying on naval tactics

that range from gray-zone operations to exploiting the vulnerabilities of technologically superior adversaries. With a history of such behavior, the KPAN is well positioned for these operations, which include maritime zone incursions and surprise, swarming attacks using small, fast vessels that are particularly effective in littoral and narrow maritime zones (Vego 2019, 119-120). North Korea has also historically conducted surprise, one-off attacks that Victor Cha (2011) accurately described as "hit-and-run" operations. Submarines have been a frequently used tool for such operations in littoral environments (Koh 2014). Miniature submarines, although technologically outdated, have proven effective in underwater guerrilla tactics, such as the sinking of the ROK Navy corvette Cheonan in March 2010. These submarines are also notorious for their use in amphibious operations, infiltrating agents and commandos into South Korea, as seen in incidents like the Gangneung infiltration in September 1996 and the Sokcho infiltration in June 1998.

While these tactical actions have had strategic effects—altering the long-term behavior of the ROK and the US—seaborne strikes from newer platforms could enable North Korea to conduct operations with broader strategic implications, extending beyond its traditional uses of submarines. Submarine-based strikes rely on the element of surprise, offering mobility, stealth, and survivability that distinguish them from land-based and airborne strike capabilities. North Korea's new class of SSBs could potentially conduct such operations, launching SLBMs and SLCMs from coastal waters toward targets in Japan and South Korea. However, attacks by North Korean SSBs are significantly constrained compared to other navies with submarine-based strike capabilities due to outdated technologies and vulnerabilities to detection, tracking, and neutralization, which severely limit their operational range. The limitations of the KPAN submarine fleet define what is feasible; currently, there is neither the capacity nor the intention to transform the KPA into a full green-water—let alone blue-water—navy capable of denial and control in the open seas. As long as North Korea continues with its existing submarine fleet, strategic, operational, and tactical

doctrines will primarily focus on guerrilla and nuclear strike operations within North Korea's immediate maritime periphery. Even for SSBNs, unless North Korea develops the capability to operate and fight in the open seas, these vessels will likely focus on submerging for extended periods within their own waters to conduct surprise attacks, rather than engaging in long-range operations.

Overall, North Korea's SSBs and future SSBNs may not lead to significant changes in operational and tactical doctrines, especially if the KPAN remains a coastal navy. However, the shift in operations and tactics for seaborne strikes will create new capability requirements not only for the submarines themselves but also for the combat and support assets of the KPA across all domains. These could include improved anti-air and ship defense, anti-submarine warfare, countermine warfare, C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance), logistics, and submarine rescue capabilities.

It is also crucial to consider how North Korea will translate these new capabilities into operational readiness. While North Korea has likely already set the operational and tactical doctrines for its submarines, bringing these new capabilities into effective use will require years of trials, errors, and adjustments. Even if North Korea masters the technological aspects, questions remain about how it will coordinate and integrate these capabilities and establish the appropriate command and control mechanisms to enable what would be increasingly complex and joint operations.

Conclusion: Regional Implications and Countermeasures

Despite the evident shortfalls, the threats posed by North Korean submarines warrant serious attention. Pyongyang is aware of the readiness problems within its submarine fleet and the limitations of their

effectiveness, which incentivizes the regime to address these shortcomings in the coming years. Even if North Korea fails to fully achieve all the objectives outlined in its five-year military plan, this is unlikely to deter continued efforts in successive plans.

As North Korea expands the mission of KPAN submarines from asymmetric attacks and commando infiltration to include missile strikes, the level of threat increases accordingly. Notably, if the KPAN submarines are improved in terms of speed, range, and stealth, they could be deployed to or near the Tsushima/Korea Strait, significantly enhancing their ability to threaten the ROK. The threat posed by KPAN submarines is expected to grow in the medium to long term as North Korea both qualitatively and quantitatively strengthens its submarine fleet alongside SLBMs and SLCMs. Although the exact future composition of the KPAN fleet remains uncertain, it will likely consist of miniature submarines for guerrilla attacks in coastal areas, along with several conventional and nuclear medium-sized submarines for missile strikes. Even if the Hero Kim Kun Ok remains limited in capability, as North Korea's most advanced operational platform with submarine-launched strike capabilities, it is expected to pave the way for improved variants in the future. The threats are not limited to strategic and tactical strikes on cities, infrastructure, and defense units of the US, Japan, and the ROK, but also extend to maritime transport systems in the sea lines of communication around the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese archipelago. Even if attacks are not executed, the possession of such capabilities broadens concerns for both national defense and transport safety and security.

Countering the threat posed by the modernizing KPAN submarine fleet is theoretically straightforward but practically challenging. Although the new class of submarines could be targeted by US, ROK, and Japanese anti-submarine warfare assets, and their missiles intercepted by missile defense systems, the expanding array of North Korea's capabilities creates bandwidth problems in effectively countering what would likely be dispersed, saturation missile attacks. The situation

worsens when considering the risk of simultaneous contingencies on the Korean Peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait, a scenario that could overstretch the resources of the US, Japan, and the ROK (Garlauskas 2023).

The KPAN's miniature submarines remain a threat not only because of their potential for guerrilla attacks in littoral zones and at sea but also due to their cost-imposing effects. Although these platforms are limited in capability and vulnerable once detected, they are inexpensive and available in significant numbers, posing risks to the advanced vessels of the US, ROK, and Japan (Singer 2009). Therefore, when combined with larger attack and missile submarines, the KPAN submarine fleet is sufficiently diverse to pose significant challenges for US, ROK, and Japanese forces. Addressing the threats posed by KPAN submarines clearly requires anti-submarine warfare, naval mine warfare, and missile defense capabilities. While the US, ROK, and Japanese naval forces already possess such capabilities, the ongoing and future developments in the KPAN submarine fleet will increase demands on these assets, further straining their limited resources as they work to acquire and operationalize other capabilities needed to counter both North Korea and China.

Effective countermeasures also necessitate US-Japan-ROK trilateral coordination and cooperation (Hinata-Yamaguchi 2016). Although political tensions between Seoul and Tokyo have historically posed challenges, trilateral security coordination and cooperation have significantly improved over the past year, likely bolstering deterrence against North Korea. However, numerous areas still require improvement, including capabilities, operations, enhanced exercises, and interoperability. The critical question is the sustainability of this trilateral relationship, as domestic political changes in any of the three countries could unravel the progress made, undermining deterrence and creating conditions conducive to North Korean provocations, including those involving its expanding submarine capabilities.

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Vietnam's Stance Towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

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Abstract

This paper explores Vietnam's engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched in 2013, the BRI seeks to enhance China's role in global infrastructure and its global economic integration. Vietnam, with its strategic location and rapid economic growth, is a key participant. However, Vietnam's response to the BRI has been cautious, shaped by historical experiences, geopolitical tensions, and domestic considerations. Vietnam aims to balance leveraging BRI investments with mitigating risks associated with Chinese projects, including concerns over sovereignty, economic dependency, and public sentiment. The paper highlights Vietnam's approach to the BRI, comparing it to neighboring Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. It finds Vietnam's engagement is marked by cautious optimism, driven by the need to address infrastructure gaps while safeguarding national interests. However, the unresolved South China Sea dispute and negative perceptions of China-funded projects further complicate Vietnam's stance.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Vietnam-China Relations

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was initiated by China in 2013 as a global strategy for infrastructure development. Introduced by Chinese leader Xi Jinping, the BRI aims to make investments in over 150 countries and international organizations. This initiative was inspired by the ancient Silk Road, which facilitated cultural exchange and trade between China and the Mediterranean across Eurasia. It has attracted significant global attention due to its immense scale and has been described as "one of the most ambitious [projects] in recent history" (Hillman 2018). The BRI is built upon five primary pillars: financial integration, infrastructure connectivity, free trade facilitation, policy coordination, and cultural exchanges (ibid.). The initiative involves extensive investments in public works such as railways, airports, ports, roads, telecommunications networks, and power facilities. From 2013 to 2022, the imports and exports between China and BRI nations totaled $19.1 trillion, with an average yearly growth rate of 6.4% (Xinhua 2023).

Vietnam plays a significant role in the BRI within the region. It is strategically positioned in Southeast Asia and acts as a vital gateway for China's regional access. Vietnam has also notably achieved rapid economic growth. Since Vietnam's economy continues to expand swiftly, there is an urgent need for infrastructure development to match this growth. In 2022, Vietnam dedicated 6% of GDP to public works, surpassing the average for ASEAN countries of 2.3% and establishing itself as a leading investor in infrastructure in the region (ASEAN Briefing 2024). Still, experts highlight a gap between Vietnam's existing infrastructure and its aspirations as a rapidly growing economy. Vietnam aims to maintain a GDP growth rate of 7% annually, which requires substantial investment capital (Vietnam Briefing 2023).

Strong economic growth has increased strain on the country's infrastructure, leading to major concerns for foreign investors regarding the quality and reliability of facilities. Inadequate infrastructure can

hinder business development, while recent trends show that improved infrastructure can effectively attract investment. Global supply chains require timely and efficient transportation of goods, while production facilities rely on a stable electricity supply. Without addressing these transportation and infrastructure challenges, Vietnam risks falling behind in managing future export growth.

Currently, most funding for infrastructure projects comes from the state budget or official development assistance (ODA), which is insufficient to meet the growing demands of development. There is minimal contribution from domestic private investors, and the foreign investment sector has only 18 projects in areas such as electricity, water, and telecommunications, with a total registered capital of 3.714 trillion VND (Vietnam Energy 2024). Estimates suggest that Vietnam will require $605 billion in infrastructure investment from 2016 to 2040, highlighting the urgent need to actively pursue diverse financial sources to bridge the gap between investment needs and the current trendline of approximately $102 billion (Hiep 2024).

In contrast to Vietnam, China holds significant advantages in supporting infrastructure projects due to its extensive financial resources and expertise in large-scale development. Chinese companies often provide streamlined financing and have a proven track record in executing similar projects across the region, making the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) an attractive option for Vietnam to boost its infrastructure investment.

Despite this, Vietnam's response to the BRI remains somewhat uncertain despite issuing welcoming statements and outlining implementation principles. Several factors have tempered its potential. Foremost among these is the unresolved South China Sea dispute, which creates tension and complicates relations between Vietnam and China. Additionally, the less-than-ideal reputation of China-funded infrastructure projects in Vietnam and elsewhere has contributed to Vietnam's cautious approach. Despite expressing support diplomatically for the BRI, Vietnam remains cautious and hesitant about accepting Chinese loans through this

program. This caution reflects Vietnam's efforts to balance its economic interests with safeguarding sovereignty and effectively managing its relationship with China.

It is crucial to analyze the implications of the BRI for bilateral relations, given the intricate political, economic, and strategic dynamics between the two nations. Vietnam's involvement in China's BRI is driven by national interests, security concerns, and domestic factors. Yet Vietnam's stance on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also influenced by its economic objectives, infrastructure needs, connectivity aspirations, and strategic calculations concerning the South China Sea dispute and relationships with great powers such as China and the United States.

Vietnam's approach can be understood as external balancing, where states seek to counter threats from dominant powers, and strategic hedging, where flexible tactics are employed to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes (Marston 2024). Vietnam's cautious approach to the BRI reflects strategic hedging, aiming to maximize benefits while mitigating risks and preserving sovereignty. Furthermore, it is shaped by the international system and power distribution (Firoozabadi and Ashkezari 2016). Vietnam's stance on the BRI thus reflects its assessment of regional power dynamics, especially China's growing influence. Vietnam strategically positions itself to safeguard its national interests within this evolving system, maintaining a balanced approach in its interactions with various actors.

In this context, this paper is structured into three sections. The first examines Vietnam's current involvement in the BRI. The second part of the paper will examine the benefits and drawbacks of the BRI for Vietnam. It aims to clarify Vietnam's perspective on the initiative by evaluating its associated advantages and disadvantages. To gain a deeper understanding of Vietnam's position, it is crucial to assess how neighboring ASEAN members like Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, which share close geographical proximity with Vietnam, are engaging with the BRI. These countries are actively participating in the initiative

and offer valuable insights that may influence Vietnam's approach. By drawing lessons from their experiences, Vietnam can better shape its BRI-related policies. Finally, the paper will conclude with an analysis of Vietnam's participation in the BRI, including its perceived benefits and risks.

Vietnam's Engagement with the BRI

Vietnam's involvement in the BRI takes place within the context of a significant broader economic relationship. China has consistently ranked as Vietnam's top trading partner for the past two decades. Currently, Vietnam stands as China's largest trading partner within ASEAN and holds the fourth position globally, trailing only the US, Japan, and South Korea. Vietnam and China have had deeply interconnected economies for an extended period. Nong Duc Lai, the Trade Counselor of the Vietnamese Embassy in China, has highlighted that bilateral trade has grown significantly, increasing more than eightfold over the past 15 years (VietnamPlus 2024). Specifically, when the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was established in 2008, the bilateral import-export turnover was only $20.8 billion (Vietnam Briefing 2024). By 2022, this figure had surged to $175.56 billion, with Vietnam's exports reaching $57.7 billion, marking a 3.18% increase (Hao 2024). In 2023, the economic relations between the two countries remained strong, particularly in advancing the BRI cooperation framework. During the first 10 months of 2023, bilateral trade between China and Vietnam totaled $138.9 billion, with Vietnam exporting goods worth $49.6 billion to China (Vietnam Customs 2023). This marked a 5.1% increase compared to the same period in 2022, and these exports to China accounted for approximately 17% of Vietnam's total exports globally (Hao Hieu and Thao 2024).

Chinese capital plays a crucial role in Vietnam's development trajectory, particularly in terms of investment. In the first 10 months of

2023 alone, Chinese investment surpassed $2.5 billion across 555 projects, making China Vietnam's fourth largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) (Tien Phong 2023). Moreover, in 2023, numerous Chinese enterprises, especially those deeply integrated into global supply chains, continued to expand their investment activities in various northern provinces of Vietnam.

Within this context, Vietnam actively supports the BRI and stresses the importance of boosting economic connections through it. Speaking at the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in October 2023, Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong, emphasized Vietnam's dedication to global connectivity across land, air, sea, and digital platforms (Belt and Road Forum 2023). He welcomed initiatives aimed at fostering economic linkages and regional connectivity, envisioning a multi-connected, open, inclusive, and sustainable global economy that prioritizes people. Throughout 2023, Vietnam continued to demonstrate its positive role in the BRI and broader economic connectivity initiatives. During significant meetings between the Vietnamese President and Chinese leaders at the Forum, both parties agreed to strengthen a more sustainable and balanced economic, trade, and investment relationship (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China 2023). They also pledged to enhance cooperation in infrastructure connectivity, particularly under initiatives like the "Two Corridors, One Economic Belt" and the BRI. The Two Corridors, One Economic Belt (TCOB) initiative, introduced by Vietnam and China in 2004, seeks to strengthen regional connectivity and economic cooperation between the two nations. It focuses on two key economic corridors: the Kunming-Lào Cai-Hà Nội-Hải Phòng and Nanning-Lạng Sơn-Hà Nội-Hải Phòng routes, linking China's Yunnan and Guangxi provinces with northern Vietnam (The Investor 2024). Additionally, the initiative aims to establish an economic belt around the Beibu Gulf, promoting trade and investment (The Investor 2024). As part of the BRI, TCOB has advanced infrastructure development, increased trade, and attracted foreign investment in Vietnam's key sectors. In the long run, Vietnam continues to welcome direct investments from

China, as emphasized during talks between Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in September 2023 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China 2022). In early December, Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Tran Luu Quang suggested ways to improve customs clearance efficiency at border points and crossings, as well as at Vietnam-China border markets, during a meeting with Wang Yi, China's Foreign Minister and Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China (VietnamPlus 2024). He also advocated for expediting procedures to allow certain Vietnamese agricultural and aquatic products into the Chinese market, completing the setup of the Vietnam Trade Promotion Office in Hainan Province, and facilitating Vietnam's participation in significant trade and investment promotion events and exhibitions in China. During the same meeting, Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Tran Luu Quang also recommended accelerating transportation infrastructure connectivity, particularly railways, and promoting cooperation in emerging sectors like the digital economy and environmentally sustainable development. He stressed the need to conclude negotiations on several key cooperation agreements, including the Cooperation Plan to enhance connectivity between the TCOB framework and the BRI.

While Vietnam diplomatically supports the BRI, the country's involvement in projects has been more limited. A notable project is the Cat Linh-Ha Dong urban railway, which represents Vietnam's inaugural urban rail system. The project adhered to advanced Chinese technological standards for its trains. Both governments worked to ensure the railway's completion by November 2021. Initially approved by Vietnam's Ministry of Transport in October 2008 with a budget of over 8,700 billion VND (about $552 million), the project's implementation costs escalated to 18,001.59 billion VND (around $868.04 million) (VNExpress 2024). It was partially financed by a concessional loan from China amounting to $669.62 million, supplemented by Vietnam's contribution of $198.4 million (VietnamPlus 2024). Despite not being officially recognized as a BRI project, its importance in Vietnam-China

cooperation is evident. Prior to his state visit to Vietnam in December 2023, Chinese leader Xi Jinping underscored the importance of the Cat Linh-Ha Dong railway as a crucial infrastructure project that would enhance transportation for residents of Hanoi (Xinhua News 2023).

Furthermore, the Vinh Tan 1 thermal power plant stands out as a prominent BRI project largely backed by China (Thanh and Ba 2021). It represents a substantial investment in Vietnam's infrastructure, specifically addressing electricity shortages in the southern region with its 1,200 MW capacity and advanced technologies. Funded largely by Chinese entities, the plant played a crucial role in bolstering Vietnam's energy sector.

In addition, in 2018, China Railway 5th Survey and Design Institute Group Limited, with support from China's concessional aid loan program, began planning for the Lao Cai-Hanoi-Hai Phong railway line, aiming to establish a connection with China. This project aims to seamlessly connect domestic and international railway networks through China, facilitating efficient transshipment across various transportation modes. The railway serves as a vital transport artery in the northern region's East-West economic corridor, meeting the demand for high-quality, rapid, convenient, and secure transportation. Upon completion, the railway line will connect Hai Phong's international gateway seaport, encompassing Dinh Vu, Nam Do Son, and Lach Huyen ports, to China's northern railway at Lao Cai. This connectivity allows trains direct access to China's Kunming–Hekou railway system. Subsequent phases of the project aim to extend the railway from Hai Phong to Cai Lan station in Quang Ninh province, further enhancing regional connectivity and economic integration.

Vietnam's Perspective on the BRI

Vietnam cautiously supports the BRI primarily to address its substantial infrastructure requirements, while nonetheless maintaining

reservations (Psaledakis and Prak 2016). Vietnam has encountered numerous challenges, such as poor quality, slow implementation, and significant cost overruns. A notable case is the Cat Linh metro project, which faced substantial delays compared to its original schedule. The Chinese EPC contractor involved in Vietnam attributed the delays in the Cat Linh-Ha Dong project to insufficient funding. Initially planned for completion in 2014, the project was delayed by six years (Vietnam News 2020). During this period, the Chinese contractor requested an additional investment of $19 million, which was not approved by China, leading to financial constraints that hindered project progress (Vietnam News 2020). Moreover, the project exceeded its initial budget by over 100%, amounting to 9,200 billion VND (VietnamPlus 2022). As the repayment periods for loan agreements approached, Vietnam's Ministry of Finance had to allocate funds from the accumulation fund to settle the debt. Additionally, during inspections, Vietnam's Ministry of Labor, War Invalids, and Social Affairs Inspectorate uncovered numerous violations by China's Sixth Railway Group Limited Company. These violations included paying wages below the state-mandated minimum. Specifically, a review of 20 labor contracts revealed that the Chinese company paid a basic salary of 3,000,000 VND per month, whereas the minimum wage in Hanoi's region I was 3,100,000 VND per month in 2015 (Người Lao Động 2015).

In addition, the company had failed to enroll 28 out of 82 eligible employees in social insurance and unemployment insurance programs as required by regulation. The inspection also revealed neglect in safety technical inspections for eight machines and pieces of equipment, including one chain hoist with a load capacity exceeding one ton and seven chain hoists with a load capacity of five tons (Người Lao Động 2015). These machines are subject to stringent safety regulations. This oversight led to several incidents in Vietnam. On November 6, 2014, two steel beams, each exceeding ten meters in length, fell from the scaffolding at the construction site located on Nguyen Trai Street for the Cat Linh-Ha Dong urban railway project, resulting in the death of a

civilian (VNExpress 2014). Then, on December 28, 2014, another serious incident occurred at the same construction site when the concrete scaffolding suddenly collapsed onto the road, crushing a taxi carrying three female passengers (VNExpress 2014). The accident site was just 100 meters from where the previous fatal incident had occurred a little over a month earlier. These incidents have significantly affected perceptions of Chinese investment projects in Vietnam.

There is also concern that China might export outdated technology to Vietnam, a situation observed in certain metro line projects. China, in its drive to maintain competitiveness, faces challenges in upgrading its technologies. Consequently, outdated or depreciated equipment and machinery may be transferred to neighboring countries through investment projects or aid initiatives where Chinese contractors are involved in construction. This approach includes subtle methods such as technology transfer via collaborations, development projects, mergers, acquisitions, and business takeovers.

An example illustrating this situation is the Cat Linh-Ha Dong metro project, which utilizes Chinese technology and was financed and constructed under Chinese contracts. Vu Hong Truong, General Director of Hanoi Metro, has pointed out that while the railway meets technical standards that are aligned with European norms, the exact phase or specific European standards referenced has not been specified (VietnamPlus 2024). This lack of clarity raises concerns about the project's quality and safety, which can only be definitively assessed once the railway is fully operational. Vietnam, along with other countries, has received surplus and outdated technology from China (Open Development Mekong 2016). Accepting such technology can have significant immediate, and potential long-term, consequences. However, current warning and monitoring mechanisms may not yet possess the necessary sensitivity to adequately identify and address these concerns. Under the guise of technology transfer, these negative impacts can persist, potentially undermining the competitiveness of Vietnamese products in global markets compared to superior Chinese

offerings in terms of design, pricing, and innovation.

The proposed railway project connecting Lao Cai-Hanoi-Hai Phong, part of the BRI, spans over 441 kilometers with a designed maximum speed of 160 km/h (Open Development Mekong 2016). Its aim is to bolster trade connectivity, providing a route from western Asia through to Europe. Vietnamese National Assembly Chairman Vuong Dinh Hue has stressed the geographical proximity and historical ties between Vietnam and Yunnan, China, highlighting potential cooperation opportunities (VietnamPlus 2024). He stressed the importance of enhancing leadership exchanges between local authorities and effectively implementing existing cooperation mechanisms and agreements between Yunnan and Vietnamese localities. Key areas of collaboration include railway connectivity, particularly the Kunming-Lao Cai-Hanoi-Hai Phong route, tourism, and sharing experiences in poverty alleviation and sustainable development. Chairman Vuong Dinh Hue has also emphasized the need for close coordination in border management to ensure a peaceful and stable border region. Yunnan's leaders have expressed readiness to deepen economic and trade cooperation, encourage investment in Vietnam, and import high-quality agricultural and seafood products (VietnamPlus 2024). They proposed enhancing infrastructure connectivity, border gate operations, customs clearance efficiency, and cooperation in green agriculture, modern agriculture, green energy, healthcare, culture, education, and tourism. However, concerns have been raised about the underlying intentions of the railway project. Some perceive it primarily as a means to transport goods from China's Yunnan and western Sichuan regions to Hai Phong port, offering a shorter route compared to shipping to eastern Chinese ports. This could potentially reduce costs and increase the competitiveness of Chinese goods, primarily benefiting China's economic interests. Such a scenario poses significant risks for Vietnam; defaults on debt payments could lead to concerns about collateral seizure, similar to situations observed in Malaysia and Sri Lanka involving port assets.

These Malaysia and Sri Lanka cases serve as stark reminders of the

risks associated with large-scale infrastructure projects financed by China under the BRI. In Malaysia, the cancellation of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project was attributed to the high annual interest rates associated with the financing agreement (Reuters 2019). The East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) in Malaysia was first introduced in 2017 under the Najib Razak administration as part of a broader initiative to enhance the country's infrastructure and connectivity. The project aimed to connect the east coast states of peninsular Malaysia to the west coast, facilitating trade and promoting economic development in less developed regions. By improving transportation efficiency and reducing travel times, the ECRL was expected to support economic activities by linking key cities and industrial hubs. However, after the change in government following the 2018 elections, the new administration led by Mahathir Mohamad decided to cancel the project (Cannon 2019). Concerns over its high costs and potential impacts on national debt prompted the government to question its financial viability and pursue negotiations to lower its budget. The Malaysian government found that continuing the project would impose an unsustainable financial burden, with annual interest payments exceeding 500 million MYR (approximately $120 million) (Jebson and Lee 2019). This decision highlighted Malaysia's challenges in managing the financial obligations associated with Chinese-funded projects, leading to the project's termination and subsequent negotiations with the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) for compensation. Recently, the Anwar Ibrahim government has revived the ECRL, asserting that it will move forward at a reduced cost compared to the original estimates. The government is committed to optimizing the project's execution to ensure it provides economic benefits to local communities while enhancing regional connectivity.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the lease agreement of the Hambantota port marked a significant development. Sri Lanka faced challenges in repaying debts owed to Chinese enterprises, leading to the decision to lease the strategic port to China on a 99-year lease (Gangte 2020). Under this arrangement, the China Merchants Port Holdings Company

acquired a 70% stake in the port by investing $1.5 billion (AP News 2017). Under the terms, an upfront payment of 30% of the investment was made to the Sri Lankan government, effectively transferring operational control of the port to China (Nikkei Asia 2024). These incidents underscore potential risks for countries participating in the BRI, particularly concerning debt sustainability and sovereignty over critical infrastructure. The Sri Lanka case, in particular, has raised concerns about countries under financial strain being pressured to cede control of vital national assets to Chinese investors as a means to alleviate debt burdens (Gangte 2020).

The North-South Expressway project is a major initiative on Vietnam's infrastructure agenda, designed to enhance transportation links, especially for agricultural products from the Mekong Delta to China. This project was deliberated under the BRI framework during the High-Level International Cooperation Forum in China. Vietnamese Minister Nguyen Chi Dung held discussions with Mr. Bach Ngoc Chien, representing China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) and China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), regarding their substantial engagement in Vietnam's infrastructure sector since 1996 (Tuoi Tre News 2023). Mr. Bach Ngoc Chien highlighted the successful completion of more than 20 energy projects and infrastructure in Vietnam, including Cai Mep-Thi Vai Port, Vinh Tan-Binh Thuan Thermal Power Plant, the Hanoi-Hai Phong Expressway, and several wind power projects (Tuoi Tre News 2023). He conveyed CHEC's and CCCC's keen interest in participating in Vietnam's extensive infrastructure initiatives, including the North–South High-Speed Railway and various highway expansion projects. However, there are concerns about the strategic implications of the North–South Expressway linking with China's military base at Sihanoukville port in Cambodia. This connection could potentially give Beijing strategic leverage over Vietnam, particularly in military activities. Despite these concerns, the project promises economic benefits by integrating Vietnam's railway system with China's, enhancing connectivity with Russia, Central Asia, and Eastern

Europe, which could significantly bolster Vietnam's economic growth.

The discussion highlights the dual nature of the BRI for Vietnam—offering economic opportunities alongside strategic risks. As Vietnam advances its infrastructure development, it must carefully weigh both the economic benefits and strategic implications to protect its national interests and sovereignty. Balancing engagement with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework while preserving strategic autonomy presents a significant challenge for Vietnam's foreign and economic policy apparatus.

Vietnam is especially mindful of the strategic implications of the BRI, particularly against the backdrop of ongoing disputes in the South China Sea. Over-reliance on Chinese capital could potentially compromise Vietnam's strategic autonomy. Above all, Vietnam maintains a cautious stance based on its historical experiences defending against Chinese invasions. This historical context shapes Vietnam's careful approach to engaging with China, especially in large-scale infrastructure projects under the BRI.

Recently, Vietnam has upgraded its diplomatic relations to the highest degree of "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" with key powers such as the US, Japan, and Australia. Currently, Vietnam maintains Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships with China (since 2008), South Korea (since 2012), Russia (since 2012), India (since 2016), Japan (since 2023), the United States (since 2023), and Australia (since 2024). This strategic upgrade underscores Vietnam's intent to leverage benefits from major global players, positioning the United States alongside China in Vietnam's diplomatic hierarchy. It reflects Vietnam's commitment to an independent and autonomous foreign policy, aiming to avoid dependency on any single nation. Vietnam's position is articulated in its 2019 Defense White Paper, which details a non-aligned policy termed the "Four Nos": avoiding military alliances, rejecting foreign military bases on its soil, maintaining non-alignment in conflicts between countries, and abstaining from using its territory to threaten or use force in international relations (Alexander 2024).

Vietnam's partnerships with these countries underscore its significance in the Indo-Pacific, offering a range of options and prospects. For example, Vietnam plays a prominent role in the US's and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policies as a comprehensive strategic partner. Following the diplomatic upgrades, Vietnam swiftly secured numerous investment agreements with the United States and Japan. Furthermore, Vietnam has significantly benefited from Official Development Assistance (ODA) from Japan, which offers alternative funding avenues for infrastructure projects, reducing dependence on Chinese investments.

In contrast to China, Japan is widely recognized as ASEAN's most dependable partner (VietnamPlus 2023). Since 1992, Japan's ODA has been instrumental in Vietnam's socio-economic progress, amounting to more than 2,700 billion yen in ODA loans, around 180 billion yen in technical cooperation, and nearly 100 billion yen in non-refundable aid (Vietnam Business Forum 2023). This represents more than 30% of bilateral development aid to Vietnam, with a significant focus on critical infrastructure initiatives (Vietnam Business Forum 2023). Japan excels in a diverse range of infrastructure projects, particularly in transportation, energy, urban development, and water management. Its expertise in high-speed rail systems and urban transit solutions positions Japan as a leader in creating efficient and sustainable transport networks. Furthermore, Japan prioritizes renewable energy initiatives and innovative urban planning, highlighting its commitment to sustainable development and disaster resilience.

Currently, Japan maintains a significant edge over China in Southeast Asia's infrastructure development arena, with pending projects valued at 1.5 times the amount of China's investments in the region (South China Morning Post 2019). Japanese-funded initiatives across the six largest Southeast Asian economies amount to $367 billion, which notably exceeds China's $255 billion (South China Morning Post 2019). This data underscores Japan's significant role in public works investment in Southeast Asia, even amidst China's substantial expenditures on

railways and ports under the BRI. According to estimates from the Asian Development Bank, Southeast Asian economies require $210 billion annually for infrastructure investments from 2016 to 2030 to sustain their economic growth (Asian Development Bank 2023).

Among that, Vietnam stands out as the primary recipient of Japan's infrastructure investments, with ongoing projects totaling $209 billion, representing more than half of Japan's total investment in the region (Minh, 2019). This encompasses the ambitious $58.7 billion high-speed rail project that will connect Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (VNExpress 2021). Japan has built a strong reputation as a key infrastructure partner, significantly shaping Vietnam's development landscape (Ministry of Construction of Vietnam 2007). A notable example is Ho Chi Minh City Metro Line 1, primarily funded through Japanese official ODA. Although this important project has faced substantial delays due to complex land acquisition issues and technical challenges, Japan's involvement has introduced advanced technology and engineering practices, setting new standards for public transportation (Lao Dong 2024). In addition to the metro line, Japan has contributed to various infrastructure projects in Vietnam, including road and bridge construction, port development, and smart city initiatives such as Terminal 2 of Noi Bai international airport, Nhat Tan bridge and Bai Chay bridge. These efforts enhance connectivity and stimulate economic growth while promoting high-quality infrastructure standards. Japan's dedication to sustainability and resilience, along with its financial backing, strengthens its role as a key partner in Vietnam's development initiatives.

While Japan significantly contributes to enhancing Vietnam's infrastructure, concerns arise about the country's considerable reliance on the BRI. Vietnam strategically leverages its multilateral and bilateral relations to assert its regional influence and safeguard its autonomy. Domestically, public sentiment towards China has deteriorated in recent years, particularly due to the South China Sea disputes, whereas support for government policies involving Japan and the United States remains robust among the Vietnamese populace. This situation highlights

Vietnam's careful approach in balancing its international engagements with domestic sentiments and historical contexts.

The Vietnamese and Chinese governments have cooperated to manage the issue of Vietnamese public opinion. In November 2024, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong achieved a historic milestone as the first foreign leader to meet Chinese leader Xi Jinping, following China's 20th National Congress of the Communist Party, a pivotal political event in China (Bao Chinh Phu 2022).

At the same time, Vietnam demonstrates a stronger preference for Japan's ODA over Chinese loans. To accelerate infrastructure development in alignment with its requirements, Vietnam needs to diversify its funding sources. While Japan provides low-interest rate loans aimed at sustainable development, Chinese financing often involves commercial terms with higher interest rates and stricter repayment conditions, presenting greater financial risks. Vietnam seeks to carefully balance advantages and risks by diversifying its infrastructure investments across multiple international partners, leveraging more favorable financial terms from countries like Japan alongside investments from China. While Japanese ODA offers stable and sustainable support for Vietnam's infrastructure needs, the country must approach its collaborations with China cautiously, ensuring that economic partnerships align with its national interests and development objectives.

Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand: Implications for Vietnam

The experiences of neighboring countries have important implications for Vietnam, especially neighboring countries like Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, which strongly support the BRI and maintain strong ties with China.

Looking first at Laos, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic

Beijing has capitalized on new opportunities with Vientiane as part of a wider aid effort in the region (Tap chi Lao-Viet 2020). In exchange for support and good relations, Laos has committed to three core demands from China: endorsing China's positions on Taiwan and Tibet, granting Chinese firms access to exploit Laotian resources, and facilitating the construction of transportation routes linking Laos with Thailand (Saigon Times 2023). China is set to emerge as the largest investor in Laos, having already allocated billions of dollars across various sectors including hydropower, agriculture, mining, and construction as part of its broader BRI. The construction of the China-Laos railway, initiated in late 2016, involves the collaboration of six Chinese contractors and is a major component of the BRI (Voros and Pongkhao 2021). The railway extends 414 kilometers from Boten in northern Laos, near China's border, to Vientiane, the capital city. Its primary goal is to integrate into routes extending from China's Yunnan province to Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, contributing to the development of a China-centered pan-Asia railway network. Additionally, China has obtained a 90-year lease for the Boten economic zone in northern Laos, adjacent to Yunnan province (Nikkei Asia 2019). This agreement enables Chinese investment in infrastructure such as hotels, entertainment venues, restaurants, and shopping centers aimed at attracting local and regional tourists. However, reports indicated significant challenges faced by Lao workers, including 3-4 month wage delays due to COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdowns (Nghiên cứu chiến lược 2022). Furthermore, more than half of the workers are handling multiple tasks under harsh conditions at construction sites (Nghiên cứu chiến lược 2022). These issues have led to negative perceptions of Chinese projects in Laos, echoing concerns similar to those surrounding the Cat Linh metro project in Vietnam.

Another significant BRI project endorsed by the Lao government involves building a sixth major dam on the Mekong River. The project, referred to as the Sanakham project, was submitted to the Mekong River Commission (MRC) on September 9, 2019 (Saigoneer 2020). Situated

155 kilometers north of Vientiane in the Sanakham district, this dam is expected to produce around 684 MW of electricity, and is planned to commence operations by 2028 (Reuters 2020). The proposal has triggered strong opposition due to fears that the dam could severely disrupt the flow of the Mekong River, a crucial Southeast Asia resource already affected by multiple obstructions. Concerns center on potential threats to the river's sediment, fisheries, and the exacerbation of downstream flooding and droughts, impacting more than 60 million people dependent on its resources. Additionally, Vietnam considers non-traditional security issues crucial, especially concerning projects in southern Vietnam within the Mekong region. The Sanakham hydropower plant, with an estimated cost exceeding $2 billion, will be constructed by Datang Sanakham Hydropower Company, a subsidiary of China's Datang International Power Generation Co. China has previously invested significantly in Laos's hydropower projects along the Mekong River, constructing 11 dams upstream in its own territory (VNExpress 2020).

As of 2019, Laos faces a mounting challenge with its public debt, which has surged to over 60% of GDP, a threshold economists deem "dangerously high," according to data from the Lao National Economic Research Institute. This situation underscores significant economic implications for the small country as it navigates its financial landscape (Nghiên cứu chiến lược 2022). In recent years, Laos has struggled with persistent budget deficits, resulting in a significant accumulation of public debt and mounting pressure on the national budget.

The BRI has been criticized for contributing to this problem. Since the end of 2013, China has emerged as the largest foreign investor in Laos (Tap chi kinh te Sai Gon 2023). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that Laoss's public debt could escalate to approximately 122% of GDP this year, partly due to BRI loans (International Monetary Fund 2023). The loans have put considerable strain on Laos's foreign reserves, which have sharply declined. This depletion has combined with rising global food and fuel costs and a currency crisis that saw the Lao

kip plummet to record lows against the US dollar. In September, inflation was at 25.7%, a slight decrease compared to the previous 12 months but still a concerning figure (Laos News Agency 2023). There are concerns that Laos may face economic collapse if the current crisis intensifies.

To tackle its economic challenges, the Lao government has taken several stabilization measures, including increasing interest rates, issuing bonds, and collaborating with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on debt management strategies. Furthermore, Laos has reduced spending on critical services such as education and healthcare. Despite these efforts, without a concrete agreement on debt reduction with China, Laos remains uncertain about meeting its financial obligations. The World Bank (WB) has noted that China granted significant debt relief to Laos from 2020 to 2022, providing temporary relief (World Bank 2022). This relief amounted to approximately 8% of Laos's GDP in 2022 (World Bank 2022). However, China's assistance has been constrained to this specific timeframe. Laos is finding it increasingly difficult to fully repay its debts to China, resulting in the decision to grant controlling shares of its national electricity company, EDLT, to China Southern Power Grid Co., Ltd (Mahtani and Ore 2023). This development raises concerns for both Laos and China. If Laos defaults on its debts, it could severely impact its economic growth and political independence. Furthermore, it may strengthen perceptions of China engaging in debt trap diplomacy, potentially damaging China's reputation and the credibility of the BRI.

This situation is relevant for Vietnam as well. Although the situations of Laos and Vietnam are different, Laos's experience with the BRI highlights the risks Vietnam could encounter if it becomes overly dependent on Chinese capital, especially in light of Vietnam's ongoing disputes in the South China Sea with China.

Cambodia occupies an even more central position in China's BRI across Southeast Asia, as demonstrated by substantial infrastructure projects supported by Chinese investments. By early 2018, Chinese

funding had supported the construction of over 2,000 kilometers of roads, a new container port terminal at the Phnom Penh Autonomous Port in Cambodia, and seven major bridges (Mahtani and Ore 2023). Notably, the $3.8 billion Dara Sakor investment zone is controlled by a Chinese firm under a 99-year land lease agreement (Mahtani and Ore 2023). Cambodia's strong endorsement of the BRI is motivated not only by its economic advantages, but also by Beijing's political support for leader Hun Sen amid global criticism of his authoritarian governance and human rights practices.

In May 2023, Cambodia asked China to fund the ambitious Funan-Techo Canal project, estimated to cost $1.7 billion and spanning 180 kilometers (CNN 2024). This initiative aims to improve transportation in the capital, Phnom Penh, by linking it to the deep-water port of Sihanoukville. The canal will begin at the Bassac River (a tributary of the Mekong) and traverse four provinces—Kandal, Takeo, Kampot, and Kep—benefiting around 1.6 million people (Jakarta Post 2024). Despite being Southeast Asia's largest river, the Mekong's role in Cambodia's logistics is limited, as all downstream exits are in Vietnam. Although Cambodia has a coastline, it lacks significant rivers leading directly to the sea. Consequently, 33% of its import and export cargo must transit through Vietnam's lower Mekong, incurring substantial fees (CNN 2024). Additionally, transportation and customs clearance costs in Cambodia are significantly higher than in Vietnam, giving Vietnam considerable influence over Cambodia's economic lifelines. As part of China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative, the Funan-Techo Canal aims to facilitate regional trade and economic integration. Once completed, it will be 100 meters wide and 5.4 meters deep, allowing cargo ships weighing up to 3,000 tons to navigate through (CNN 2024).

On December 11, 2023, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet met with Vietnamese Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính during an official visit to Hanoi. In their discussions, Prime Minister Chính expressed concerns that the Funan-Techo Canal could negatively affect the Mekong River's environment and water flow into Vietnam. He warned

that the Funan-Techo canal, once operational, will exacerbate the freshwater shortage in Vietnam's Mekong Delta for daily life, agriculture, and production; saltwater intrusion will become deeper and more prevalent; and ecosystems will be disrupted. This will adversely impact the Mekong delta, which covers an area of approximately 40,000 square kilometers and is home to over 17.4 million people (VNExpress 2024). It accounts for 50% of the country's rice production, 65% of aquaculture, and contributes 17% of national GDP (VNExpress 2024). This region is severely affected by drought and salinity and is considered one of the three deltas in the world most heavily impacted by climate change. Thus, initiatives associated with the BRI raise significant concerns for Vietnam across multiple sectors.

Cambodia differs from other BRI participants by preferring to implement projects by private Chinese companies rather than relying on inter-governmental loans. While this strategy may mitigate the risk of falling into a debt trap, it also reduces Cambodia's autonomy and increases its dependence on the global economy. The recent imposition of US sanctions on JDG highlights Cambodia's potential involvement in the increasing strategic rivalry between China and the United States, especially if BRI projects facilitate China's military objectives in the area (VOV 2021).

Cambodia's heavy reliance on Chinese investment is evident from the Cambodian Development Council's approval of approximately $1.9 billion in foreign investment in 2022, with 90% originating from China (Mit 2024). This highlights Cambodia's susceptibility to economic fluctuations in the event of reduced Chinese investment. To cultivate a more resilient and diverse economy, Sihanoukville, which heavily relies on Chinese investments, should broaden its industrial base and attract investments from a variety of countries. Japan, which has backed Sihanoukville's sole deep-water port for nearly three decades, albeit with a smaller footprint compared to other Southeast Asian nations, emerges as a prospective investor.

The distinction between Cambodia and Laos in relation to the BRI

lies in their economic scale and diversity of foreign investment sources, which contrasts with Vietnam's more advantageous position. Vietnam benefits from a larger economy and a broader array of foreign investment sources, including significant infrastructure support from countries like Japan. While accessing funds from China's BRI can accelerate Vietnam's infrastructure development, it represents just one avenue among many for capital diversification.

Certainly, Laos's significant dependence on Chinese investment highlights the complexities of economic reliance and political influence. As a smaller and less economically diversified nation, Laos confronts heightened challenges in balancing its developmental requirements with the strategic interests of its influential neighbor. In contrast, Vietnam, with its larger and more diverse economy, enjoys greater flexibility in attracting foreign investment. This diversity enables Vietnam to manage risks associated with excessive dependence on any single source, particularly China. While Chinese investments under the BRI can enhance Vietnam's infrastructure, they should be integrated into a comprehensive investment strategy aimed at fostering sustainable and independent economic growth.

Cambodia's embrace of substantial Chinese investment and support holds significant implications. Similar to Laos, China's investments and trade exert influence on Cambodia, shaping its foreign policy and aligning it more closely with Chinese interests. This situation has caused Cambodia to alter its diplomatic position on regional and global matters, frequently aligning with China's interests. For example, Cambodia's decisions influenced by Chinese pressure, such as the deportation of Uighur asylum seekers and blocking ASEAN statements on the South China Sea, have diminished its diplomatic standing within ASEAN and on the global stage (Vannarith and Heng 2019). As Cambodia and Laos navigate their relationships with China and the BRI, Vietnam benefits from having a more diversified economy and investment portfolio. This diversity enhances Vietnam's resilience and strategic flexibility, allowing it to effectively balance economic growth with maintaining diplomatic

autonomy.

Cambodia's substantial dependence on Chinese capital carries significant risks, particularly the potential for slipping into a debt trap. By mid-2021, Cambodia had accumulated over $9.18 billion in external debt, with China comprising approximately 44% of this amount (International Monetary Fund 2021). This debt represents over 75% of Cambodia's GDP, making China its largest creditor (International Monetary Fund 2021). In this scenario, China wields substantial leverage, potentially pushing Cambodia to lease vital infrastructure assets to address debts, as has occurred in Sri Lanka. A key asset under scrutiny is the Sihanoukville deep-water port, strategically located to influence the Gulf of Thailand and the Malacca Strait—a critical global trade route. Chinese control of this port could challenge the US presence in the region and raises security concerns for maritime areas in the south, including those of Vietnam.

China's extensive investments in Cambodia have undeniably accelerated infrastructure development, but have also triggered significant environmental and social disruptions. One notable example is the Kamchay hydroelectric dam, funded by China with a capacity of 194 MW, which has led to substantial ecological harm. Situated in the ecologically diverse Bokor National Park, the dam inundated 2,291 hectares of land and forests, severely affecting local resources crucial for the livelihoods of nearby residents (Giuseppina et al. 2016). Moreover, the influx of Chinese migrants attracted by these investments has brought forth cultural and social challenges. In Sihanoukville, a substantial Chinese presence dominates sectors such as casinos, restaurants, and hotels, reshaping the local economy but often sidelining local employment opportunities. Reports of social issues including brawls, human trafficking, and illegal labor, such as instances where Vietnamese citizens were trafficked and coerced into working in casinos, have escalated, exacerbating social stability concerns in the region. The expanding Chinese cultural influence in strategically vital locations like Sihanoukville also raises additional worries regarding Cambodia's

sovereignty and regional security dynamics.

The influence of conditional Chinese investment in Laos and Cambodia highlights their significant dependence on China, impacting both countries economically and politically while also affecting ASEAN unity. Cambodia, in particular, has leaned towards China, a stance that has hindered ASEAN's ability to reach effective agreements on the South China Sea issue, where consensus among ASEAN members is crucial. This dynamic serves as a cautionary example for Vietnam, especially its South China Sea dispute with China.

While Laos and Cambodia demonstrate a tendency to prioritize economic interests over concerns about debt and political influence, Thailand is a compelling counterexample. The Sino-Thai railway project aimed at connecting Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima showcases Thailand's cautious approach, weighing potential economic benefits against the strategic implications of Chinese financing (ASEAN Briefing 2024). Despite the promise of enhanced trade and connectivity, Thai leaders were apprehensive about the risks of accumulating unsustainable debt and relinquishing control over vital infrastructure. Concerns about debt-trap diplomacy underscored the fear of becoming overly dependent on China and compromising national sovereignty. As a result, Thailand prioritized negotiations that would ensure significant control over the project's execution and management. The project has faced significant delays, exacerbated by internal political dynamics, including elite infighting and shifting government priorities (ASEAN Briefing 2024). These challenges highlighted the complexities of balancing immediate economic needs with long-term strategic goals, revealing how domestic politics can impact international partnerships. Ultimately, the Sino-Thai railway project illustrates that, particularly in the early stages of major infrastructure initiatives, strategic considerations can take precedence over short-term economic gains. This situation stands in stark contrast to the experiences of Laos and Cambodia, as Thailand navigates foreign investment while striving to protect its sovereignty and long-term national interests.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of Vietnam's stance towards the BRI and its experience with Chinese projects, it is evident that Vietnam supports the BRI cautiously. Negative perceptions have stemmed from challenges such as stringent loan conditions requiring Chinese contractors, technology purchases, and concerns over project execution issues like delays and cost overruns. Vietnam's past dealings with Chinese loans, where Chinese contractors often brought in labor and outdated technology, have further shaped its cautious approach. Despite ostensibly unrelated issues like South China Sea disputes, Vietnam is wary of potential dependencies if unable to repay debts, alongside generally negative public sentiment towards Chinese projects.

There are major concerns about debt sustainability. Many BRI projects are financed through state-controlled Chinese lending institutions, which often leave borrowing countries burdened with substantial debt. As interest rates increase and repayment deadlines loom, these nations risk falling deeper into debt, creating opportunities for Beijing to exert control over strategic assets. Vietnam is particularly cautious of the potential for China to leverage this indebtedness for political or economic pressure, which could force the country into unfavorable agreements that undermine its sovereignty. Moreover, the intensifying geopolitical competition between the US and China risks Vietnam becoming ensnared in this rivalry. Striving to maintain balanced relations with both powers, Vietnam is anxious about being pressured to align with one side, potentially limiting its options and increasing vulnerability. Ultimately, Vietnam interprets the US's debt trap narrative not only as a warning about financial dependency, but also as a signal of the shifting geopolitical landscape. This context underscores the necessity for Vietnam to carefully navigate its relationships to safeguard national interests and ensure stability.

Vietnam's potential overreliance on BRI funds could jeopardize its autonomy in managing these disputes, potentially complicating bilateral

negotiations with China and its position within ASEAN forums. Therefore, Vietnam must exercise caution to ensure that economic interests do not unduly influence political decisions, particularly concerning the sensitive South China Sea issue. It is essential for Vietnam to balance economic cooperation, including with initiatives like the BRI, with strategic autonomy and national interests. Moreover, Vietnam needs to carefully assess non-traditional security concerns arising from Chinese investments, such as environmental impact, social stability, and regional power dynamics, when engaging in BRI projects. Vietnam's approach should prioritize sustainable development, regional stability, and maintaining ASEAN unity while navigating its complex relationship with China.

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Differing US and Chinese Approaches to Peacekeeping: The South Korean Perspective[1]

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Abstract

Why does China prefer to participate in UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) while the United States does not? Although both the US and China advocate for international peace and emphasize its importance, their attitudes toward UN PKOs differ significantly. Since the end of the Cold War, the US has shifted from a willingness to participate to a more lukewarm stance, while China has transitioned from a negative to a positive attitude. While some explanations focus on material national interests, I argue that China seeks recognition for its proclaimed identity as a responsible great power, whereas the US does not share this motivation. This divergence in motivation arises from their differing global statuses in the history of UN PKOs. Meanwhile, South Korea, which aspires to become a "global pivotal state," can draw lessons from the contrasting approaches of these two superpowers toward UN PKOs. Among several implications, the article recommends that South Korea align its proclaimed identity as a global pivotal state with how it is perceived by others, using PKOs as a means of contributing to international peace.

Keywords: Peacekeeping, China, US, responsible great power, global pivotal state

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Introduction

In the fact sheet for the 2023 Accra Peacekeeping Ministerial, the United States acknowledged "the critical importance of UN peacekeeping as a tool to prevent conflict and protect civilians" (US Department of State 2023). Similarly, the People's Republic of China recognized that "UN peacekeeping has made a significant contribution to world peace as an instrument developed for peace" (China's State Council Information Office 2020). Despite this similar perception of UN peacekeeping by the two superpowers, their approaches diverge. For example, the US document highlights its own non-UN peace operations, while China emphasizes the role of its military in UN peacekeeping operations.

Why do these two powers, both professing a commitment to peace, take such different approaches? Why does China prefer to participate in UN PKOs while the United States does not? Beyond the significance of these questions in understanding US and Chinese foreign policies, the answer offers insights for South Korea, which seeks to contribute to global peace as part of its aspiration to become a "global pivotal state" (Yoon 2022). This article aims, first, to explore the contrasting approaches of the US and China to UN peacekeeping, and, second, to examine these approaches from a South Korean perspective to consider their implications for South Korean peacekeeping operations.

Unlike other permanent members of the UN Security Council, who have shown little change in their involvement in UN PKOs, the US and China present an interesting case of divergence. As strategic competitors, their differing behaviors in this area may partly stem from their broader rivalry. However, I also argue that these divergent approaches are rooted in their differing global identities: the US, a fully recognized superpower, versus China, a burgeoning superpower still seeking full recognition. While the US is unquestionably acknowledged as a superpower, China continues to strive to align its proclaimed identity as a great power with the way it is perceived by others. PKOs are one avenue through which this effort is visible.

For South Korea, which is working to gain recognition as a "global pivotal state," there are important lessons to learn. Seoul should, mutatis mutandis, consider adopting aspects of China's approach, regardless of China's implicit intentions, to align its proclaimed identity with how it is perceived by others. For South Korea, this would mean increasing its contributions to peace operations both regionally and globally.

This article is organized as follows. First, it establishes a theoretical foundation by analyzing selected literature and constructing an identity theory for state-led PKOs. Next, it examines the divergent approaches of the US and China to UN peacekeeping operations. Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications of these differences for South Korean policymakers and peacekeepers.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Although UN peacekeeping has been widely studied across various fields—both in academia and in practice—this article focuses on studies in South Korea, given the aim of deriving implications for South Korea. The study of peacekeeping in South Korea, particularly in the context of UN PKOs, has developed along three principal lines of inquiry.

First, some studies primarily aimed to elucidate the nature of PKOs, emerging as a concern in South Korea in the 1990s when the country dispatched its first peacekeepers to Somalia in 1993 (Song 2016). These studies can be further categorized into those that focus on the development of UN PKOs themselves (Kim 1999; Cho 2008; Jung and Jung 2012; Lee 2014) and those that analyze individual cases of UN PKOs (Hwang 2015; Kim and Yoo 2019; Lee 2022).

Second, research examining the development and performance of PKOs by the Republic of Korea (ROK), including overseas military deployments, has been largely policy-oriented, focusing on the legal process for deployment as well as the role and performance of the ROK in PKOs. Early studies primarily addressed the legal and institutional

issues surrounding the deployment of the Korean military (Jhe 2007; Jeon 2010; Yun 2016; Kim 2020). As deployment experience accumulated, studies evaluating the performance of PKOs became the dominant line of research (Yang 2015; Park 2019; Yun 2020; Park 2020).

Finally, studies on the strategic utilization of South Korea's PKOs are increasingly calling for a more strategic approach, based on their achievements. These studies either highlight the need for strategic utilization due to domestic challenges—such as the lack of experts, practical objectives, and governance—that hinder a strategic approach to PKOs (Kim 2023), or argue that the evolving nature of UN PKO activities requires Korea to adjust its approach (Kim 2022; Moon and Yun 2022).

Despite the abundance of research on PKOs in South Korea, there has been a notable lack of attention paid to the approaches of major contributors such as the United States and China. In contrast to global studies, research on China's PKOs is limited in South Korea, and studies on the US are even more scarce.[2] Additionally, comparative analyses between these two countries are virtually nonexistent. Consequently, conventional wisdom in South Korea has no adequate explanation for the differing approaches of the US and China to UN PKOs. This study seeks to address this research gap by focusing on the discursive identity of states.

It is widely acknowledged that image—whether in the form of perception or cognition—plays a significant role in international relations, particularly in terms of foreign policy analysis (Anholt 2011; Hermann 2013). Especially after the Cold War, many scholars began to examine foreign policy through the lens of identity (Vicetic 2017). To analyze the behavior of states, they raised questions such as: Who are we? What do we do? Who are they? What does their identity mean for our actions? (Hudson 2014; Grove 2010).

2 For China's PKOs, see Yoo (2008), Park (2013), Lee (2020a), and Kim et al. (2022). For US PKOs, see Lee (2014) and Min et al. (2021).

These studies found that a state's identity significantly influences its foreign policy. State identity can be divided into two types: proclaimed identity and perceived identity. Proclaimed identity refers to the characteristics a state implicitly or explicitly pursues. Similar to this is the concept of "global identity," defined as "the structure of ideas of political elites that relate to their country's role in the international system" (Boon 2018, xvii). However, proclaimed identity is not limited to a state's role; it also encompasses a state's desires. On the other hand, perceived identity refers to the identity recognized by others, regardless of the state's claims (Lee 2020b, 13-15). Some scholars term this an "imagined identity," noting that recognition by other countries is not necessarily based on the state's objective characteristics (Lee 2018, 30-32).

This distinction between proclaimed and perceived identity helps explain the divergence in the approaches of the US and China in the context of PKOs. The putative goal of UN PKOs is to achieve global peace through collective efforts by the international community, especially major powers such as the permanent members of the UN Security Council (Damrosch 1993). If peace support and great power status are the two key components of a positive image conferred by PKO participation, the US is concerned primarily with peace support, as its status as a great power is undisputed. However, for China, doubts remain regarding both its peace-supporting role and its great power status.

Given that identity is socially constructed (Wendt 1992), the formation of China's state identity is influenced by three factors: China's increased national power, its growing participation in international institutions, and its deeper socialization within the international community (He 2019, 255-256; Johnston 2008). While China's national strength in the contemporary era is undeniable, debates persist regarding its future power status, often framed in terms of the "China Threat," which suggests that China may challenge the existing international order as a revisionist state (Danner and Martin 2019; Allan et al. 2018; Womack 2015).

In response, China has portrayed itself as a responsible great power (Deng 2014, 123; Xia 2001), and Chinese political leaders actively seek recognition of this identity (Yahuda 2007, 341). China's perceived role as a responsible great power can be negotiated with others, and such recognition can confer an international identity of responsibility. One way China seeks to achieve this is by demonstrating that its values align with those of the international community, such as through participation in PKOs (Boon 2022). China's task is to close the gap between its proclaimed identity as a responsible great power and its uncertain perceived identity. Participation in international peace operations provides a means for China to engage with international institutions and further socialize with the global community.

US Reluctance Toward UN PKOs

The United States has been one of the major contributors to UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) from the beginning. For example, two Americans served as special representatives of the Secretary-General in the UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC), despite the fact that the US had not contributed armed forces (United Nations "Republic of the Congo"). It was anticipated that the US would become more involved in UN PKOs following the end of the Cold War, when the number of such operations increased. Due to growing intra-state conflicts accompanied by economic hardship, human rights abuses, and loss of life, the UN and major countries are actively engaged in tackling these issues (Pelz and Lahmann 2007; Perkins and Neumayer 2008).

President George H.W. Bush indeed demonstrated a favorable attitude toward UN-led PKOs after the Gulf War. For example, his administration paid off the US's outstanding payments to the UN, directed the US military to focus on peacekeeping planning and training, and increased support for UN-led missions. Bush also supported UN PKOs in Angola, Cambodia, Central America, Mozambique, Namibia,

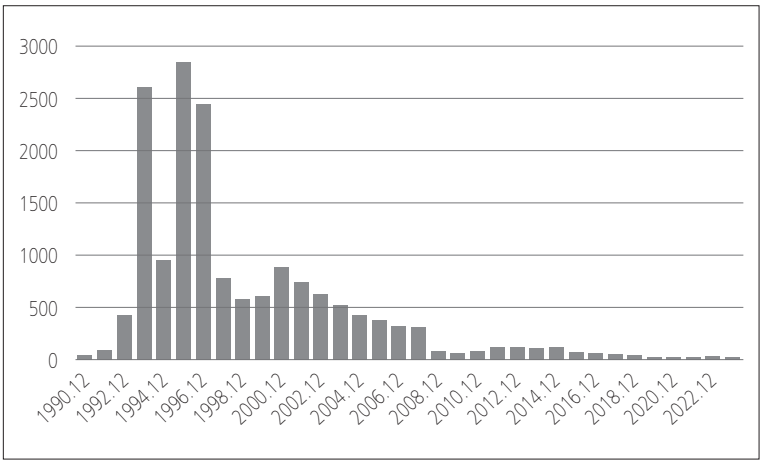
Western Sahara, the former Yugoslavia, and El Salvador, as well as the December 1992 US-led humanitarian intervention in Somalia (Holt and Mackinnon 2008, 19-20).

This can be attributed to three main factors (Sokolsky 1997, 5-6). First, the inertia of US involvement in global affairs as a superpower, born from two world wars and the Cold War, may have led to this attitude. Second, the US believed that events in many parts of the world affect its interests. Even if they did not directly threaten military or economic security, increased regional instability and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction could ultimately pose a risk to US vital interests (Neack 1995). Finally, the US was preoccupied with an idealistic role rooted in its belief in exceptionalism and responsibility. The positive US attitude toward PKOs stemmed from the idea that international peace could be achieved through the spread of capitalist market economics and liberal democracy, and the view that multilateral intervention, rather than unilateral action, was more likely to gain international legitimacy (Kassebaum and Hamilton 1994, 1-3).

This attitude was reflected in the "assertive multilateralism" of the subsequent Clinton administration (Szandzik 2023, 183; Mackinnon 2000). It was expected that the US would provide strong support for UN PKOs, evidenced by Washington's approval of PKOs in Georgia, Uganda–Rwanda, Liberia, Haiti, and Somalia during Clinton's first year in office. Additionally, the initiation of a peacekeeping policy review in February 1993 through Presidential Review Directive 13 (PRD-13) demonstrated the commitment to this approach. However, after the US Special Forces casualties in Mogadishu, Somalia, in October 1993, and the subsequent genocide of over 800,000 people in Rwanda six months later, criticism of UN PKO effectiveness became widespread in the US, not only among policymakers but also in Congress and the broader public. In October 1993, public opinion polls indicated that 65% of respondents favored the withdrawal of US troops from Somalia (Burk 1999, 70). Concerns about US military personnel being under foreign command and control also grew (Holt and Mackinnon 2008, 20).

Figure 1

THE NUMBER OF US PEACEKEEPERS IN UN PKOs (1990-2022)



Source: United Nations, "Troop and Police Contributors."

As a result, US troop participation in UN PKOs began to plummet, as shown in Figure 1, and US attitudes toward PKOs themselves shifted. This change was reflected in Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD-25), which emerged from the earlier PRD-13 review and provided the first comprehensive post-Cold War framework for US policymaking with respect to UN PKOs (Holt and Mackinnon 2008, 21). Although PDD-25 was publicly released in May 1994, many scholars note that the review began in early 1993, and the first draft was prepared in July of that year, explaining the policy shift away from involvement in Somalia (Szandzik 2022, 185). PDD-25, titled "US Policy on Reforming Multilateral Peace Operations," emphasized US support for multilateral peace operations but was more focused on independent action (White House 1994, 2). It underscored that while peace operations can be an important tool to advance US national interests in certain circumstances, they cannot replace unilateral or coalition action when national interests are at stake. Additionally, the directive highlights that the US would not sideline other tools for achieving its objectives and would prioritize national interests when peacekeeping efforts interfere with the core US

military strategy of being prepared for two major regional conflicts (White House 1994, 3).

During Clinton's second term, the US accordingly prioritized peace operations through regional organizations such as NATO over the UN (Aubone 2013). This policy shift also entailed bearing the economic costs of peacekeeping while avoiding direct military involvement, even in US-led UN PKOs.

The George W. Bush administration initially demonstrated little enthusiasm for UN PKOs and opposed the mobilization of US troops for peacekeeping and humanitarian missions (Holt & Mackinnon 2008, 26). Donald Rumsfeld, then Secretary of Defense, argued that the US should stay out of multinational peace efforts, not just UN PKOs (Dobbins 2021). However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks led to a reevaluation of this stance. Although attention shifted from peace operations to stabilization operations, peace in unstable regions remained crucial to preventing terrorism. Peacekeeping in fragile states that could become breeding grounds for terrorism also grew in importance (Sen 2021).

In response, the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) was established in 2005. Launched during the Bush administration, GPOI aimed to fulfill US obligations under the G8 Action Plan for Expanding Global Capability for Peace Support Operations, adopted at the 2004 G8 Summit in Sea Island, Georgia (US Department of State 2023a). The action plan focused on Africa, with the goal of training and equipping 75,000 peacekeepers by 2010 (White House 2004). The initiative sought to prevent potential conflicts through financial assistance rather than direct military intervention (United Nations "Key Topics—Office of Global Programs and Initiatives"). The current vision of GPOI is to extend its scope and promote international peace and security by enhancing global commitments to effective UN and regional peace efforts (United Nations "Key Topics—Office of Global Programs and Initiatives"). Although the State Department manages the initiative, more than half of all GPOI-related activities are carried out by the US Department of Defense (Perez 2013).

This orientation toward PKOs has persisted across the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, with only minor differences in attitude. Achieving long-term, sustainable peace—beyond the cessation of conflict and prevention of recurrence—requires institutionalizing the process, including building and developing national organizations, such as a strong military and police force, capable of maintaining peace and stability (Min et al. 2021, 100). This approach was reflected in a presidential directive issued during the Obama administration. The Memorandum on United States Support to United Nations Peace Operations (DCPD-201500663), the first presidential directive on UN PKOs since the Clinton administration, acknowledged the effectiveness of UN PKOs but called for reforms to manage costs, complexity, and risks. Additionally, it advocated for a broader range of engagements beyond UN PKOs to assist fragile states (White House 2015). This shift was reflected in the African Peacekeeping Rapid Response Partnership (APRRP), established in 2015 based on the 2005 Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) program funded by GPOI. APRRP was a three- to five-year initiative to train and rapidly deploy peacekeepers in six African partner countries—Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, and Uganda—with approximately $268 million in funding for the 2017 fiscal year (United Nations "Key Topics—Office of Global Programs and Initiatives"). Its mission is to build and institutionalize the capacity to respond rapidly to crises on the continent, complementing GPOI's broader capacity-building efforts (Zuerlein and Arevalo 2023).

The attitude toward UN PKOs during the Trump administration was largely predictable (Diehl 2019, 540). Despite arguments from some analysts that working through UN PKOs is more cost-effective than US-only peacekeeping (Peterson 2017; Sambanis 2008; Dobbins et al. 2005), President Trump sought to reduce the US budget for PKOs by $1 billion (Nichols 2017). Although these budgetary cuts were largely resolved under the Biden administration (Blanchfield 2024, 1), there has been no significant change in personnel contribution under Biden. As

of February 2024, the US has deployed a total of 27 personnel to UN PKOs, including four experts, two police officers, 21 staff members, and no military personnel, ranking the US 75th out of 117 contributing countries (UN 2024).

In sum, the post-Cold War development of US attitudes toward UN PKOs can be summarized as follows. First, the focus has shifted from UN PKOs to independent US peace operations such as GPOI and APRRP. The US also operates a PKO account through the Office of Security Assistance in the Department of State to support non-UN international peace missions (Gil & McCabe 2023, 15). Second, the approach has shifted from troop contributions to financial support. The US remains the largest financial contributor to UN PKOs, accounting for 27.89% of the budget in the 2020-2021 fiscal year—more than the combined contributions of the next two largest contributors, China (15.21%) and Japan (8.56%) (United Nations "How We Are Funded"). Third, despite variations in attitude across different administrations, there has been a consensus that PKOs are effective tools for advancing US national interests (Holt and Mackinnon 2008, 19). The US has shaped PKO evolution to align with its own policy goals rather than eliminating them from its foreign policy. For instance, when the US has supported UN PKOs, it has used its position as a permanent member of the Security Council to expand peacekeeping mandates or push for UN reforms (Williams 2015, 11). Finally, US ambivalence toward UN PKOs is less about its identity as a superpower and more about securing regions and avoiding outcomes that could harm US interests and advantages.

China's Active Participation in UN PKOs

China has emerged as a significant contributor to UN PKOs, both financially and in terms of personnel. For instance, China contributes 15.21% of the UN PKO budget, ranking second only to the United

States (27.89%) and nearly twice as much as Japan (8.56%), the third-largest contributor (United Nations "How We Are Funded"). As of February 2024, China is contributing 1,870 personnel, a figure that exceeds the combined total of all other permanent members of the Security Council (United Nations, "Troop and Police Contributors"). However, China's engagement with UN PKOs has not always been as enthusiastic as it is today. Scholars divide China's evolving attitudes toward PKOs into several distinct periods, though there is some disagreement on the exact categorization. He (2007) identifies four periods: an initial period of inactivity (1971–1980), a phase of evolving attitudes (1981–1987), a period of emergence as a major actor (1988–1998), and a phase of renewed engagement (1999–present). Zürcher (2019) offers a similar four-phase division but with slightly different date ranges (1981–1988, 1989–1998, 1999–2003, and 2004–present), while Fung (2016) adds a fifth phase after the 2010s, during which China saw a significant transformation, including the deployment of combat troops. Regardless of the categorization, the crucial point is that China's stance has shifted from passivity and negativity to active and positive engagement.

When Beijing gained a permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 1971 it held a negative stance toward UN PKOs. During the 1970s, three PKOs were established due to the Arab-Israeli conflict, all of which China opposed. China further opposed existing PKOs, abstained from sending troops, refused to pay its share of PKO fees, and abstained from Security Council votes (Fravel 1996, 1103–1104). This opposition stemmed from China's view of UN police actions as US, and later also USSR, hegemony (Hempson-Jones 2005), a perception influenced by China's experience with the US-led UN intervention in the Korean War (Stähle 2008, 639). This had become crystalized as the "principle of non-interference" and "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" (Gazibo and Lema 2022, 31). As the only developing country on the Security Council, China saw itself as a representative of the Third World, independent of the US and the Soviet Union (He 2007, 18). For instance, when the

Second United Nations Emergency Force (UNFEF II) was established to monitor the ceasefire between Israel and Egypt after the Yom Kippur War, the Chinese ambassador expressed reservations, fearing it could pave the way for major power intervention (Fravel 1996, 1104). Furthermore, China had no tangible political or economic benefits to gain from PKOs during this period (He 2007, 19).

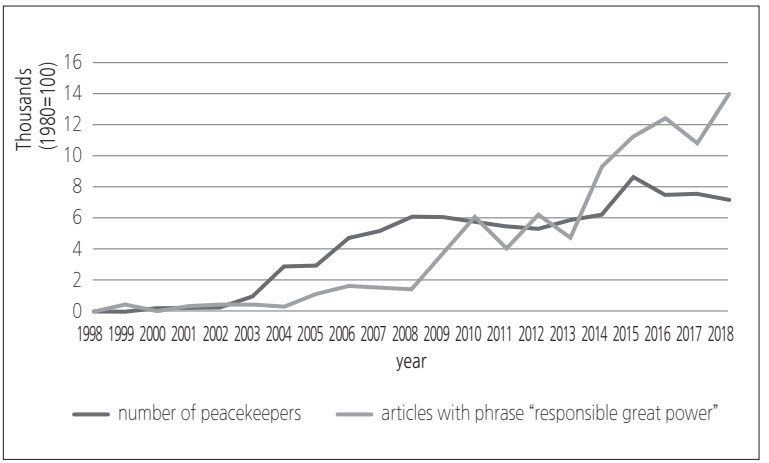
China's stance began to shift during the 1980s, expressing support for some PKOs and even participating directly (Fung 2016, 414). In 1981, China endorsed the extension of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) (Zürcher 2019, 19), and in 1982 it contributed to the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) (He 2007, 20). Still, China's participation remained selective, stating its adherence to the "principles of state sovereignty and non-interference" outlined in a 1984 *People's Daily* article that articulated China's Seven Principles on peacekeeping (Matsuda 2016, 52, 66). China formally joined the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations in 1988, paving the way for its full participation in PKOs (Zürcher 2019, 19). This shift can be attributed to positive factors, including its domestic reforms, normalized diplomatic relations with the US, restrained by negative factors of continued wariness around endorsing great power interference in the domestic affairs of others and the continued lack of practical benefits (He 2007, 23–24).

China's first official participation in a UN PKO occurred in 1989, when it sent 20 troops to the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia. This was followed by the deployment of five military observers to the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNSTO) in the Palestinian territories in 1990, signaling a growing commitment (Gil and Huang 2009, 2). From 1992 to 1993, China deployed its first military contingent—800 engineering troops—to the UN Transitional Administration in Cambodia (UNTAC) (He 2007, 24). However, even after these deployments, China's participation remained limited to traditional PKOs that adhered to principles of sovereignty and non-coercive peacekeeping (Fravel 1996, 1106-1107). China abstained from

more expansive PKOs in places like Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, which it viewed as coercive peace enforcement operations. The only exception was the United Nations Operation in Somalia II (UNOSOM II) (He 2007, 25).

However, China's attitude gradually became more flexible, driven by Beijing's fear of democratization after the end of the Cold War and the need to break out of international isolation after protestors were violently cleared from the streets of Tiananmen Square in 1989 (He 2007, 29-30). This shift to a more favorable attitude toward active peace enforcement culminated in its participation in the PKO in East Timor in 1999. As shown in Figure 2, China's troop presence grew significantly, and in 2016, it sent combat troops to South Sudan for the first time. This shift does not mean China abandoned the principle of non-interference but rather adopted a more flexible approach. Scholars offer various explanations for this change. Some argue that China sought to break free from international isolation, dispel the "China threat theory," act as a responsible power, and secure overseas interests (Fang et al. 2018). Others suggest that the evolving nature of UN PKOs allowed

Figure 2
REFERENCES TO "RESPONSIBLE GREAT POWER" IN THE *PEOPLE'S DAILY* AND THE NUMBER OF CHINESE UN PKO PERSONNEL (1998-2018).

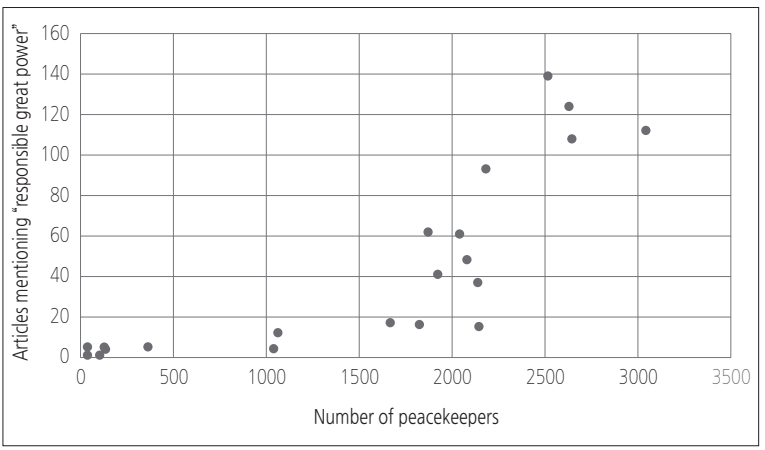


Source: *People's Daily* Online Database and United Nations, "Troop and Police Contributors"

China to incorporate them into its foreign policy without conflict (Stähle 2008). Another view is that China's dual identity as a rising power and a developing country shaped its changing stance, as it sought both to expand its global influence and to represent developing countries (Fung 2016). Some explanations focus solely on securing overseas interests, such as oil, particularly in cases like South Sudan (Lynch 2014).

Despite these varying explanations, the most important factor is China's desire to align its behavior with its proclaimed identity as a responsible great power (He 2019) in an effort to shift its perceived identity in that direction. While the term "responsible great power" (*fuzeren daguo*) was first formulated in the mid-1990s (Deng 2014, 118), it gained traction in the mid-2000s (Thomas 2020). As Figure 2 shows, the increase in Chinese peacekeepers corresponds with a rise in references to the term in the *People's Daily* articles. A simple regression shows a high correlation ($P < 0.05$, $R2 = 0.6557$) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
CORRELATION BETWEEN RESPONSIBLE GREAT POWER AND CHINESE UN PEACEKEEPERS.



Source: Author's calculation based on *People's Daily* Online Database and United Nations, "Troop and Police Contributors"

This connection is also evident in statements from Chinese leaders.

In his 2018 New Year address, paramount leader Xi Jinping highlighted China's role as a responsible power, saying "China will resolutely uphold the authority and status of the United Nations, actively fulfill China's international obligations and duties... and always be a builder of world peace" (Xinhua News 2018). Recently, China's top foreign policy official, Wang Yi, reaffirmed China's commitment to peacekeeping as a responsible power, asserting "China supports the Security Council in playing a primary role on peace and security," and emphasizing China's contributions to UN PKOs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 2024).

In contrast to the US, which does not emphasize its superpower status because it is already widely recognized, identity plays a central role in China's peacekeeping efforts. China's aspiration to be seen as a benevolent rising power drives its involvement in international peacekeeping missions. Chinese public opinion also reflects this belief: according to a poll, 91.9% of respondents thought that China's involvement in UN PKOs would enhance its global image, while 89.8% agreed that it would affirm China's position as a responsible major power (Fang and Sun 2019, 197).

In short, China's stance on UN PKOs has evolved from opposition during the pre-Cold War period to active support in the post-Cold War era. This shift reflects China's changing perception of the utility of PKOs. However, the considerable increase in support since the mid-2000s is closely linked to China's discourse on its responsibility as a great power. As China continues to rise and consolidate its status, it seeks to be recognized as a responsible great power, using participation in UN PKOs as one means to achieve this recognition.

Concluding Discussion

Summary of Findings

In the history of UN PKOs, the United States has always been a superpower, while China has evolved from a developing country into

a superpower. To a considerable extent, this difference explains their contrasting approaches to UN PKOs. The US, secure in its global status, has focused more on narrow interests. It does not need to build a favorable reputation or identity, though it must at least maintain one. Since the post-Cold War period, the US has shifted its peacekeeping focus from UN PKOs, particularly during Clinton's first term, to independent US peace operations such as GPOI, APRRP, and a PKO account in subsequent administrations. Additionally, its approach has shifted from troop-oriented to financially-oriented contributions. While the US remains the largest financial contributor to UN PKOs, it is reluctant to deploy personnel. Despite variations in support levels across different administrations, there is consensus that PKOs are effective tools for advancing US national interests. Peace in key regions—and globally—reduces the burden of US engagement around the world.

In contrast, China has sought recognition for its proclaimed identity as a responsible great power. China's growing contribution to UN PKOs aligns with its efforts to project a benevolent identity as it rises to superpower status. Unlike the US, China has demonstrated robust financial and personnel commitments to UN PKOs. These actions are part of China's effort to align its proclaimed identity with its perceived identity.

Implications for South Korea

These findings offer several implications for South Korea, a significant contributor to international peacekeeping missions, including UN PKOs.

First, South Korea should aim to better align its perceived identity with its proclaimed identity, as China has done. The Yoon Suk Yeol administration has declared that South Korea should be a "global pivotal state" (ROK Office of National Security 2023, 12). To achieve this vision, South Korea is taking steps to "expand its international peacekeeping operations to contribute to the establishment of sustainable peace in conflict areas" (ROK Office of National Security 2023,

67–68). South Korea's contributions to peacekeeping can help solidify its international recognition as a global pivotal state. Seoul must also effectively communicate this alignment to the international community, fostering synergy between its peace efforts and its "pivotal" role. This process could also have an impact at the domestic level in terms of public understanding of the global pivotal state vision and clarifying follow-up plans.

Second, insofar as China's proclaimed and perceived great power identities become increasingly aligned, it may, like the US, begin seeking alternatives to traditional UN PKOs. For example, China may push for expanding UN PKO mandates to secure its narrower core interests. In South Sudan, China argued that UN peacekeeping should protect civilian workers at oil facilities and offered to dispatch more troops to defend them (Lynch 2014). Another example is the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), which includes security cooperation. China has deployed peacekeepers in several countries that are part of the BRI, such as South Sudan, Mali, Lebanon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Loidolt 2021, 16–17). South Korea could learn from China's approach, particularly in its categorization of international peacekeeping operations into UN PKOs, Multinational Force Peace Operations (MFPs), and Defense Cooperation and Exchange (ROK Ministry of National Defense 2023, 196–197). Given South Korea's experience in overseas troop deployments, such as in Iraq and the UAE, it may benefit from adopting a broader peacekeeping strategy that goes beyond traditional UN PKOs.

Third, US-China strategic competition could lead the US to shift its preference from financial support to more direct military involvement in peacekeeping, as a way to counter China's growing global influence. For example, the Biden administration redeployed hundreds of special operations forces to Somalia, reversing a withdrawal by President Trump (Savage and Schmitt 2022). Increased US-China competition may trigger a global race for military deployments, including in peacekeeping. While a dramatic US policy shift is unlikely in the near term, it is important for South Korea to monitor this competition closely. The

politicization of US troop numbers in South Korea could be influenced by growing demands for US military deployment overseas.

Fourth, South Korea must carefully consider how to contribute most effectively to UN PKOs. One option is the US approach, which emphasizes financial contributions, while another is China's approach, which supports both funding and personnel. As of 2024, South Korea is a significant contributor to both categories, ranking tenth in financial contributions (2.26%) and 30th in personnel (540 peacekeepers) (UN 2024). However, these contributions are imbalanced. Given its available resources and capabilities, South Korea should adopt a selective and focused approach, choosing between financial support and troop deployments depending on the feature of each operation to maximize its impact.

Finally, South Korea should reexamine the roles and responsibilities for PKOs shared among its government ministries. In the US, the State Department formulates peacekeeping policy, while the Department of Defense handles operational activities. In South Korea, the Ministry of National Defense, particularly the International Cooperation Division, is responsible for most peacekeeping tasks, while the UN Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs mainly acts as a liaison. While practically efficient, the current division of responsibilities may hinder a more strategic approach that aligns South Korea's PKO participation with its goal of building a global pivotal state reputation. While the conditions for peacekeeping engagement in South Korea differ from those of a superpower like the US and an aspiring superpower like China, effective peacekeeping policy-making and implementation are crucial for mobilizing South Korea's resources to achieve its national interests. Therefore, bureaucratic reform is necessary to conceptualize and execute a more ambitious South Korean peacekeeping strategy.

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Indo-Pacific Connector? Japan's Role in Bridging ASEAN and the Quad

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Abstract

While the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been evolving as the primary multilateral organization in Southeast Asia for nearly 60 years, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has undergone rapid institutionalization since its revival in 2017. The Quad's institutional development is often seen as a challenge to "ASEAN Centrality," which is outlined in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. For Japan, ASEAN Centrality and the public good provision that transpires through the Quad are synergistic and complementary. Both institutions are seen as important pillars for an Indo-Pacific region that is free and open, rule-of-law based, stable, and prosperous. This article examines Japan's role in bridging ASEAN and the Quad, based on the following lines of inquiry: Why does Tokyo have a role in bridging ASEAN and the Quad? What are the existing areas of cooperation? What are the underdeveloped yet important areas of cooperation that Japan can explore to enhance the synergy between ASEAN and Quad activities? This article finds that Japan's position as a reliable and trusted partner in both ASEAN and the Quad makes it well-suited to bridge the two institutions effectively.

Keywords: Japan, ASEAN, Quad, Indo-Pacific, bridge-builder

Introduction

As a leading economic, security, and political power, Japan has long played a critical role in shaping the Indo-Pacific region's economic integration and security architecture. Under the late Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Japan migrated decidedly away from its reactive diplomacy (Calder 1988) toward what Abe called a policy of "proactive contributions to peace based on the principle of international cooperation" (Kamiya 2020). This was most closely associated with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024b). Abe pursued a "proactive contributions to peace" policy through the prioritization of relations with not only advanced economies and Japan's traditional and strongest security partners such as the US, but also with Southeast Asian states. He invested much of his diplomatic capital to strengthen bilateral relations and place ASEAN Centrality as a core pillar of FOIP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024c).

In parallel with its engagement with ASEAN, Japan has also been an active participant in the Quad, which includes the United States, India, and Australia as the other member states. Abe was also the key proponent of the original Quad following the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean that killed hundreds of thousands, and an important player in resurrecting the grouping (Teo 2024) upon returning as prime minister in 2012. However, Abe's initial attempts to establish this minilateral group faced challenges due to differing China policies among the partners and Australia's withdrawal following criticism from Chinese officials, who viewed the group as an anti-China bloc (Bisley 2024). As China became more assertive, especially after its rejection of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) final judgment in 2016 (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016), the Quad was reinvigorated in 2017.

Under Abe, no other Quad member understood Southeast Asia better than Japan (Sato 2017). Tokyo consistently assisted with the

needs of individual regional states, such as through providing coast guard vessels, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief activities, and increased maritime capacity-building (Nagy 2022). Japan is also considered as a key player and an essential bridge within the Quad, particularly between the US and India.

The idea of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" was first initiated by Abe at the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development in 2016 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2016a), which precipitated others crafting their own versions. The US, and then Australia and India, have progressively endorsed this regional approach (Wilkins 2022). ASEAN itself also launched the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in 2019 (ASEAN Main Portal 2019), which is functionally synchronized with Japan's FOIP. For Japan then, ASEAN and the Quad are synergistic and complementary. Both institutions are seen as important pillars of building an Indo-Pacific region that is free and open, rule-of-law based, stable, and prosperous. However, some within ASEAN view the Quad's rapid institutionalization since its revival in 2017 as a threat to the centrality of ASEAN as the primary multilateral organization in Southeast Asia for nearly 60 years.

This article draws on a range of government and scholarly sources to illustrate the complexities of Japan's approach to bridging that gap. It examines Japan's role based on the following lines of inquiry: Why does Tokyo have a role in bridging ASEAN and the Quad? What are the existing areas of cooperation? What are the underdeveloped yet important areas of cooperation that Japan can explore to enhance the synergy between ASEAN and Quad activities? It finds that Japan's position as a reliable and trusted partner in both ASEAN and the Quad makes it well-suited to bridge the two institutions.

The article is organized into four parts. The first part serves as a general introduction. The second part delves into Japan's relations with ASEAN and the Quad, emphasizing why this is important for positioning Japan as an Indo-Pacific connector between the two institutions. The third section examines the opportunities, challenges,

and constraints of Japan's bridging role. This section also includes policy recommendations stemming from the rest of the analysis. The fourth section offers concluding reflections.

Significance of Japan's Relations with ASEAN and the Quad

This section examines how Tokyo has leveraged its connections with both ASEAN and the Quad to advance its strategic interests in the region. It highlights Japan's proven ability to collaborate constructively with ASEAN member states while also contributing to the Quad's efforts to counter China's growing assertiveness.

Japan-ASEAN Relations: Long-standing Partnership

Japan has long been a key partner for ASEAN, with the two sides establishing formal dialogue relations in 1977 (ASEAN Main Portal 2018). Over the past four decades, Japan has consistently been one of ASEAN's most important economic and political partners, providing significant development assistance, investment, and diplomatic support. Japan's engagement with ASEAN is driven by a range of strategic and economic interests, including securing access to regional markets, safeguarding maritime trade routes, and maintaining regional stability (Mely and Ueki 2015). Particularly, Japanese prime ministers frequently prioritize visits to Southeast Asian states upon assuming office. To illustrate, Abe became the first Japanese government leader to visit all 10 ASEAN member states within the first year of his administration in 2013 (Terada 2021). Abe's extensive travel to Southeast Asia was warmly welcomed since his diplomacy focused on strengthening regional multilateral security structures, while enhancing the individual member states' resilience by making strategic use of official development assistance (ODA) to build law enforcement capacities, especially in the maritime domain (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2013a). During

his visit to Jakarta in 2013, Abe highlighted the five principles of Japan's ASEAN diplomacy, including ensuring the seas are governed by laws and rules, and pursuing free, open, interconnected economies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2013b). Following Abe's tenure, Yoshihide Suga selected Vietnam (ASEAN Chair 2020) and Indonesia (the largest economy in Southeast Asia) as his first overseas destinations for official visits after assuming office in 2020 (Cook et al. 2020). In November 2023, Fumio Kishida visited the Philippines and Malaysia to enhance security and defense ties (Dominguez 2023).

A hallmark of Japan's approach has been its emphasis on multilateral cooperation and consensus-building. Japan has actively participated in and supported a range of ASEAN-led initiatives, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) framework, and the East Asia Summit (EAS) (Yoshimatsu and Trinidad 2010). Through these platforms, Japan has sought to promote regional integration, address shared challenges, and build trust among the diverse members of ASEAN (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute 2024). This process was driven by Japan's post-World War II commitment to development (Tanaka 2019) and concerns that, if Japan was not an active promoter of development and regional integration, China might lead regional integration efforts in a direction potentially detrimental to Japan's national interests (Mathur 2009).

In September of 2023, the 50th anniversary of bilateral relations, the two sides issued a Joint Statement on the Establishment of the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023c). Toward the end of 2023, they also adopted a Joint Vision Statement on ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023d). A key common point emphasized in both documents is that Japan and ASEAN consider each other to be trusted partners and commit to strengthening their comprehensive strategic partnership in a meaningful, substantive, and mutually beneficial manner, embracing ASEAN unity and centrality. This partnership is structured under three pillars, as specified in the

ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation statement: "heart-to-heart partners across generations," "partners for co-creation of the economy and society of the future," and "partners for peace and stability."

Southeast Asia's trust in Japan lies in its long-term investment in cultivating a relationship with the region, focusing on economic growth and development, regional stability, and maintaining a rules-based order (Singh 2022). Japan has been a major source of foreign direct investment (FDI) for ASEAN countries, with Japanese firms playing a significant role in the region's manufacturing and infrastructure sectors. According to the 2023 ASEAN Investment Report, Japan was the second-largest source of foreign direct investment in the region, totaling approximately US$26 billion (ASEAN Secretariat and UNCTAD 2023). Japan has funded the East-West Economic Corridor, the North-South Economic Corridor and the Southeast Economic Corridor to deepen intra-ASEAN economic integration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2020). Additionally, Japan has provided substantial development assistance to ASEAN member states, helping to address issues such as poverty alleviation, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation (Manuel 2023). The regional trust also derives from Japan's active support for the central role of ASEAN, an important regional platform that provides a source of diplomatic legitimacy not only for its member states but also a meeting place for great powers like the US and China, together with middle powers like Japan, Australia, and India, to discuss common challenges (Sato 2007).

At the political and security level, Japan has worked closely with ASEAN to address regional challenges, particularly the South China Sea disputes. Although Japan is not a claimant, the sea lines of communication in this region are vital to Japan's economy and security (Sato 2017). Japan is one of the external countries actively advocating the peaceful settlement of disputes based on the principles of international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024f). Immediately after the Arbitral Tribunal rendered its final award in the proceedings

instituted by the Philippines under UNCLOS regarding the South China Sea disputes with China, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2016b) affirming Japan's consistent advocacy for the importance of the rule of law and the use of peaceful means, rather than force or coercion, in settling maritime disputes.

In addition to vocally supporting Southeast Asian states in territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea through international law, Japan has been aiding these countries, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, by providing patrol vessels, enhancing maritime domain awareness, improving capacity building, and establishing defense dialogues at official and ministerial levels (Nguyen 2021). Last year, Japan and Malaysia signed and exchanged notes for 400 million yen in "Official Security Assistance (OSA)" grant aid in the presence of the two countries' prime ministers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023f). According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, OSA was established in 2023 with the purpose of enhancing security cooperation with recipient countries' armed forces and related organizations. The primary objectives of OSA include deepening security cooperation, fostering a favorable security environment, and contributing to the maintenance and strengthening of international peace and security. This is achieved by bolstering recipient countries' security and deterrence capabilities through the provision of equipment, supplies, and assistance for infrastructure development. On July 8, 2024, Japan and the Philippines signed the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), which outlines procedures for cooperative activities when one country's military is visiting the other, as well as defining the legal status of the visiting forces (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024g). The Philippines is the third country with which Japan signed an RAA, following Australia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022a) and the United Kingdom (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023g). Similar to the Japan-US Status of Forces Agreement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1960), the pacts are expected to facilitate faster

deployment of Japan's Self-Defense Forces and the Australian and British forces in joint drills and disaster relief operations. Japan also agreed on commencement of negotiations on an RAA with France during prime minister Kishida's visit to the European country in May 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024e). Most recently, Japan joined the Philippines, the United States, and Australia in their first joint military drills (Johnson and Benoza 2024) in the South China Sea on April 7, 2024. Not long after, the leaders of the US, Japan, and the Philippines convened their first trilateral summit (Moriyasu 2024) in Washington on April 11, 2024. The announcement of the quadrilateral partnership (Parameswaran 2023) involving Washington, Tokyo, Canberra, and Manila, focusing on maritime cooperation in the South China Sea, exemplifies the minilateral relationships that Japan is actively cultivating.

Furthermore, among Japan and ASEAN member states, exchanges of views have occurred regarding defense equipment and technology cooperation in non-traditional security sectors such as humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and maritime security (Ministry of Defense of Japan). Japan now has defense equipment and technology cooperation with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, according to the Ministry of Defense of Japan. Japan has also participated in ASEAN-led security initiatives, such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and has contributed to regional confidence-building measures and conflict resolution efforts (Hoang 2024). These efforts are meant to strengthen ASEAN's institutional robustness and strategic autonomy (Nagy 2024), enhancing the mechanisms of functional cooperation within ASEAN. Tokyo's logic is based on the view that the more economically integrated the region is and the more layered institutional cooperation that exists within ASEAN, the more strategic autonomy ASEAN will have (Pajon 2019). In other words, that means ASEAN will be able to make decisions about its political, economic, and security situation without being subject to coercion, inducements, or fracturing by non-ASEAN states.

Japan-Quad Relations: From Founder to Active Supporter

For Japan, the Quad is an essential minilateral grouping that includes the emerging power India, Japan's dominant ally the US, and the middle powers Australia and Japan, complementing the existing various security bilaterals and trilaterals among its members to manage China's rising regional and global stature (Jaffery and Muhammad 2024). Japan has played a central role in the Quad (Koga 2023a), viewing it as a crucial counterweight to China's regional ambitions (Nagao 2024). This minilateral has increased its non-military cooperation, focusing on infrastructure-building to counter that of China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Indo-Pacific region (Paik and Park 2020), with Japan viewing it as an ad hoc problem-solving mechanism that can offer public goods (Muhammad and Rahman 2023) to a developing region in need of assistance, ranging from infrastructure and connectivity to health and technology.

Not only was Tokyo the initiator of the Quad, but it has also been an active ongoing advocate, promoting deeper cooperation among the member states on various strategic and security issues (Tatsumi 2021). Japan's involvement in the Quad is motivated by a desire to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific, preserve an international order based on rule-of-law, and strengthen collective responses to regional challenges, such as maritime security, infrastructure, development, and pandemics (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023e).

Within the Quad, Japan has leveraged its strong economic and technological capabilities to contribute to the group's initiatives. For example, Japan has been a key player in the Quad's efforts to promote high-quality infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific, drawing on its expertise and experience in project financing and construction (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022c). Japan has also been an active participant in the Quad's working groups on critical and emerging technologies, cybersecurity, and climate change, sharing its knowledge and resources to advance the group's shared objectives (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023a).

The Quad remains controversial in Southeast Asia, with some critics viewing it as a means of containing China (Huong Le 2019). Minilateral groupings such as the Quad tend to be exclusive and competitive, whereas the region's longstanding multilateral framework, ASEAN, has been inclusive in approach to participation and cooperative in terms of strategic dynamic (Bisley 2022). The emergence of some minilaterals, including the Quad, has primarily been driven by growing doubts about the sustainability of US leadership and its alliance network in the region, as well as the limitations of multilateral arrangements centered on ASEAN in addressing strategic challenges (Singh and Teo 2020). Dominated by non-ASEAN powers, these minilateral mechanisms are relatively exclusive, informal, and functional, potentially impacting the evolution of the regional security architecture.

In response, the Quad members focus on practical cooperation to realize a shared "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." The Quad Foreign Ministers Meeting in September 2023 concurred on promoting practical cooperation in areas such as climate change, infrastructure, cybersecurity, critical and emerging technologies, health security, maritime domain awareness, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and counterterrorism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023b). Furthermore, whenever the Quad convenes and releases a statement, it consistently emphasizes its commitment to supporting ASEAN Centrality (Laksmana 2020). For example, the third in-person Quad Leaders' Summit (White House 2023b) was held in Hiroshima, Japan, in May 2023, where the four member states reaffirmed their unwavering support for ASEAN's centrality and unity, and agreed to further strengthen their respective relationships with ASEAN and seek opportunities for greater Quad collaboration in support of the AOIP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023e).

Japan in particular has been mindful of the potential tensions between its engagement with the Quad and its long-standing relationships with ASEAN. On one hand, Japan recognizes the importance of the Quad as a framework for like-minded countries to collaborate on various

issues, including maritime security, regional stability, and upholding a rules-based order (Hatakeyama 2024). On the other hand, Japan has also nurtured long-standing relationships with ASEAN countries, which have been a cornerstone of its foreign policy in the region (JICA 2023). Therefore, Tokyo has sought to strike a delicate balance, emphasizing the complementarity between its involvement in the two frameworks and the importance of maintaining strong ties with both groups (Koga 2023a). It has done this by placing ASEAN Centrality and ASEAN's development as one of the core pillars of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific framework.

Examining Japan's Diplomatic Bluebooks from 2016 to 2020, one can see that Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave ASEAN a central place in its FOIP framework, understanding that buy-in from ASEAN required inculcating its core principles (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024a). In the *Progress Report on Japan's Cooperation for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (2022) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022b), Japan welcomed those other partners, including the Quad who have expressed their support to the AOIP. In that sense, Japan's FOIP is seen as one of the most critical features of Japan's foreign policy (Hosoya 2019), since it is premised on regional economic development and infrastructure connectivity rather than a security focus (Miller 2019), the most distinctive feature relative to other Quad members' strategies.

While some see the decline of the Quad due to the emergence of new minilateral partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region (Velloor 2024) such as AUKUS (Australia, the UK, and the US), the "Squad" (Australia, the US, Japan, and the Philippines), and even potentially the addition of Japan to AUKUS (JAUKUS) to share regional responsibilities, it is important to note that the Quad is still undergoing development. As Indian external affairs minister S. Jaishankar said at the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting in Tokyo on July 29, 2024: "[o]ur meeting should send a clear message, that the Quad is here to stay, here to do and here to grow" (Ministry of External Affairs of India 2024). The joint

statement from the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tokyo showcases the diverse agenda of the Quad, emphasizes the group's commitment to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, covering diverse sectors such as outer space, cybersecurity, AI, health security, infrastructure, sea lane protection, climate measures, and supply chain resilience (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2024d), thus indicating multifaceted cooperation (Collins Chong and Rahul 2024).

One potential avenue for Quad development is the expansion of a Quad-Plus framework (Panda 2022) that emerged following a teleconference (Ministry of External Affairs of India 2020) initiated by US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun in March 2020. The purpose of the call was to facilitate discussions among select countries in the Indo-Pacific region regarding the collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participating in the teleconference were senior representatives from Australia, the Republic of Korea, Vietnam, New Zealand, and Japan. The discussions covered a range of topics including cooperation on vaccine development, addressing the challenges faced by stranded citizens, providing assistance to countries in need, and mitigating the impact on the global economy.

However, more than any other country, Japan understands the skepticism that ASEAN and its individual member states may have towards the Quad (Saha 2023). For example, Vietnam places significant value on the ASEAN multilateral approach and strictly adheres to its Four-Nos foreign policy, which are outlined in the 2019 National Defense White Paper and stipulate that Vietnam neither joins any military alliances, nor sides with one country against another, nor gives any other countries permission to set up military bases or use its territory to carry out military activities against other countries, nor uses force or threatens to use force in international relations (Ministry of National Defense of Vietnam 2019). This Four-Nos policy makes it unlikely for Vietnam to publicly endorse minilateral partnerships like the Quad and AUKUS. Meanwhile, the Philippines has shown a greater openness and receptiveness to these minilateral partnerships, which can be observed

in the trilateral partnership between Japan, the Philippines, and the US (JAPHUS) (Heydarian 2023), as well as the quadrilateral partnership between Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the US ("the Squad") (Heydarian 2024). Nonetheless, the crucial factor in garnering support from ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries for minilateral initiatives lies in their alignment with the goals of promoting peace, prosperity, and development in the region (Seah and Koga 2023). Japan is acutely aware of this, and hence, in addition to actively engaging in minilateral partnerships like the Quad, it has actively participated in ASEAN and its regional platforms to foster dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding.

Leveraging Japan's Bridging Role in ASEAN-Quad: Opportunities, Challenges and Constraints, and Policy Recommendations

Japan's unique position as a trustworthy partner of ASEAN and an initiator and active supporter of the Quad has allowed it to play a crucial bridging role between the two frameworks. Tokyo has leveraged its relationships and influence within each group to foster greater cooperation and alignment, helping to mitigate the potential for tensions or competition between the two.

Opportunities

One key aspect of Japan's bridging role is its ability to convey ASEAN's perspectives and concerns to the Quad members and vice versa. This role was more robust and proactive during the Trump administration but has continued under the Biden administration.

Japan's economic strength and technological capabilities position it well to lead regional economic initiatives that benefit both ASEAN and Quad countries. These initiatives compass infrastructure development, supply chain resilience initiative (Department of Foreign Affairs and

Trade of Australia 2022), and green energy projects that enhance regional connectivity and prosperity. This is evident in the India-Australia-Japan supply chain resilience initiative, which advocates for infrastructure and connectivity, as well as resilience efforts highlighted at the G7 Summit and beyond (White House 2023a).

In particular, Tokyo shares the perspective that neighbors of China cannot take a zero-sum approach to Beijing, as their economies are deeply integrated with China and have positive trade relations despite challenges (Aoyama 2024). China has retained its position as ASEAN's largest trade partner since 2009. Trade between ASEAN and China has more than doubled since 2010, from $235.5 billion to $507.9 billion in 2019 (18% of ASEAN's total) and almost quadrupled since the entry into force of the ASEAN-China Trade in Goods Agreement in 2005 (ASEAN Main Portal 2024).

As an ASEAN dialogue partner with deep ties to the region, Japan also has a nuanced understanding of the diverse interests and sensitivities of ASEAN member states, especially issues relating to economic development. According to the latest 2024 Southeast Asia annual survey (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute 2024), unemployment and economic recession remain the region's most pressing concern, followed by the impact of climate change, and the intensifying economic tensions between major powers. Tokyo has leveraged this knowledge to advocate for ASEAN's interests within the Quad, ensuring that the minilateral group's initiatives and policies consider the concerns of Southeast Asian countries.

Similarly, Japan has been instrumental in communicating the Quad's strategic objectives and priorities to ASEAN. As a Quad member, Japan has been able to provide ASEAN with a direct conduit to the group, facilitating dialogues and information-sharing on issues such as regional security, economic cooperation, and infrastructure development. This has helped to reduce ASEAN's concerns about the Quad's intentions and build greater trust between the two frameworks.

Japan's bridging role has also manifested in its efforts to align the

activities and priorities of ASEAN and the Quad. For example, Tokyo has worked to ensure that the Quad's infrastructure initiatives, such as the Quad infrastructure coordination group are complementary to, and coordinated with, ASEAN's own regional connectivity plans (White House 2021). This has helped to minimize the potential for duplication or competition between the two frameworks and rather fostered a more collaborative and mutually reinforcing approach to regional development.

Moreover, Japan has leveraged its engagement with both ASEAN and the Quad to promote greater information-sharing and coordination on shared challenges, such as maritime security, disaster management, and pandemic response (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2021). By serving as a conduit between the two groups, Japan has helped to facilitate the exchange of best practices, the alignment of policies, and the development of joint initiatives that draw on the collective capabilities and resources of ASEAN and the Quad. Looking ahead, Japan can serve as a respected convener to facilitate open dialogue and consensus-building. This may involve organizing high-level consultations and workshops to align perspectives and identify shared interests between ASEAN and Quad members.

Challenges and Constraints

Despite Japan's distinct advantages, the country faces a number of challenges and constraints in maintaining this delicate bridging act. One key challenge is the potential for strategic divergence between the two frameworks, as their priorities and approaches to regional security and economic cooperation may not always align (Koga 2023b).

For example, ASEAN's emphasis on the principles of non-interference and consensus-building (Suzuki 2019) may clash with the Quad's more assertive stance on issues such as the South China Sea dispute or the promotion of a free and open Indo-Pacific, which is explicitly mentioned in the Quad Joint Leaders' Statements. Japan must navigate these tensions carefully, ensuring that its engagement with the Quad does

not undermine its longstanding relationships with ASEAN member states or its reputation as a trusted regional partner.

Another constraint faced by Japan is the need to balance its relationships with the United States and China, both of which have a significant influence on the dynamics between ASEAN and the Quad. As a close ally of the United States and a key player in the Quad, Japan must be mindful of not alienating China, which is also a major economic and political partner for many ASEAN countries. The 2024 Southeast Asia survey report found that China continues to be seen as the most influential economic and political-strategic power in the region, outpacing the US by significant margins in both domains.

Among ASEAN's eleven Dialogue Partners, China is at the top in terms of strategic relevance to ASEAN, followed by the US and Japan (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute 2024). This balancing act requires Japan to navigate a complex web of regional rivalries and shifting geopolitical alignments. Additionally, Japan faces the challenge of ensuring that its bridging role between ASEAN and the Quad is perceived as genuine and impartial by all parties involved. In short, Japan must be perceived as engaging with ASEAN because it values the organization and the region it represents, not because it aims to balance China.

There may be concerns among ASEAN member states or Quad partners that Japan is pursuing its own narrow interests or favoring one group over the other (Kanehara 2016). Japan must therefore work to maintain a reputation for evenhandedness and transparency in its regional diplomacy. Reinforcing its commitment to the principles of ASEAN centrality and Japan's bridging role between ASEAN and the Quad is an important geopolitical dynamic that could evolve significantly in the face of the ongoing US-China and Japan-China rivalry.

In recent years, Japan has carefully navigated its relationships with both ASEAN and the Quad in an effort to balance its economic and strategic interests. As a key member of the Quad, Japan aims to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific in the face of China's growing assertiveness.

At the same time, Japan has sought to maintain productive ties with ASEAN, which is cautious about being drawn into a confrontation between China on the one hand and the US and its allies and partners such as India on the other. This bridging role enables Japan to play a unique diplomatic part, leveraging its relationships with both ASEAN and the Quad to promote stability and economic integration in the region. Japan has used its influence in both groups to promote more inclusive, ASEAN-centric multilateral frameworks that balance the interests of major powers. This entails advocating for ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (Sudo 2009), to take a central role in regional affairs, rather than allowing US-China rivalry to overshadow them, as well as reassure ASEAN members that it prioritizes their strategic autonomy, comprehending that they prefer not to have to choose between the US and China (Thompson 2024).

Additionally, rather than emphasizing democracy and human rights like other Quad members—issues that can be sensitive in Southeast Asia—Japan has concentrated on promoting principles-based governance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2023d). This approach is crucial for strengthening ASEAN cohesion, as it avoids alienating countries with different political systems. As a member of the Quad, Japan can encourage the adoption of such softer approaches, taking into account the specific needs of individual Southeast Asian countries to address regional challenges such as upholding freedom of navigation, respecting sovereignty, and promoting peaceful dispute resolution. This strategy could help reassure ASEAN states and manage tensions with China.

Policy Recommendations

The evolution of Japan's bridging role will depend on its ability to navigate geopolitical complexities amidst growing US-China rivalry. Japan's success in this regard could have significant implications for the future stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region. In that sense, Japan can leverage its favorable relations with both ASEAN and the

Quad to promote regional stability by facilitating dialogue and consensus-building, championing inclusive multilateralism, and continuing to provide economic leadership.

Japan could propose several policy initiatives to both ASEAN and the Quad to enhance maritime security in the Indo-Pacific:

1. Initiate a Regional Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) Network: Japan should establish a comprehensive MDA Network targeted at the waters around ASEAN states, similar to the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness. This would integrate existing national and sub-regional capabilities, improving early warning, maritime traffic monitoring, and coordinated responses to incidents at sea.
2. Craft Joint Maritime Security Operations: Japan could develop joint maritime security operations addressing regional challenges such as Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported (IUU) fishing. By building on existing bilateral and minilateral exercises, Japan might propose regular operations among ASEAN states and other Quad members, including joint patrols and maritime interdiction training to enhance interoperability.
3. Invest in Capacity Building and Technology Transfers: Japan's advanced maritime capabilities could be leveraged to support ASEAN states through capacity building initiatives. This could involve sharing surveillance technologies, providing training for maritime law enforcement, and assisting in the development of national coast guard capabilities.
4. Enhance Port and Coastal Infrastructure: Japan, in collaboration with Quad partners, should invest in upgrading port facilities, coastal radar networks, and other critical maritime infrastructure across ASEAN. This investment would address the challenges of climate change and improve regional connectivity, disaster response, and overall resilience of the Indo-Pacific's maritime commons.
5. Establish a Regional Crisis Management Mechanism: Japan can

facilitate a link between ASEAN and the Quad by developing a regional crisis management mechanism to address natural and man-made disasters. This could involve creating robust incident response protocols, establishing hotlines, conducting tabletop exercises, and formulating information-sharing protocols for maritime contingencies.

6. Promote Norms and Principles for Maritime Behavior: Given the ongoing challenges faced by the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea, Japan could engage with both ASEAN and the Quad to codify and promote a common set of maritime norms and principles. This initiative would help build confidence and reduce the risk of miscalculation in the region.

By advancing these types of collaborative initiatives, Japan could leverage its standing in both ASEAN and the Quad to enhance maritime domain awareness, improve operational coordination, and promote a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific's critical sea lanes. This could help mitigate tensions and maintain regional stability. There is also space for Japan propose a regional maritime crisis management framework to both ASEAN and the Quad members as a way to enhance stability and mitigate the risks of escalation in the Indo-Pacific.

Such a framework should include the following key elements:

1. Japan, through dialogue with ASEAN and Quad members, needs to establish mechanisms for incident reporting and information sharing. The framework should establish clear protocols for rapidly reporting and sharing information about maritime incidents, such as unplanned encounters, accidents, or potential confrontations between naval or coast guard vessels. This would improve situational awareness and allow for early de-escalation.
2. To realize the mechanism above it will be important for Japan to establish something akin to a hotline connection for crisis communication channels to quickly diffuse potential conflicts and ascertain timely information to best enable stakeholders to respond in a timely and appropriate manner. Dedicated crisis

communication channels, including military-to-military and coast guard-to–coast guard hotlines when appropriate, should be set up to enable rapid, direct dialogue between relevant authorities in the event of an emerging crisis. This would facilitate real-time information exchange and allow for diplomatic engagement to defuse tensions.

3. Japan could use its experience and capabilities to establish standard operating procedures for incident management. The framework should outline clear standard operating procedures for how participating countries should respond to and manage various types of maritime incidents. This could cover aspects like rules of engagement, search and rescue protocols, and joint investigation processes.
4. Part and parcel of the establishment of standard operating procedures for incident management, there is a window of opportunity for Japan to contribute to establishing confidence-building measures and a risk reduction framework between ASEAN and Quad members. This would contribute to building trust and reducing the risks of miscalculation with the framework incorporating regular joint training exercises, port visits, and other confidence-building activities between naval and coast guard forces. This would enhance interoperability and familiarity.
5. Finding ways to invest in dispute resolution mechanisms that are shared between ASEAN and the Quad would be another important contribution that Japan could make while bridging the two groupings. The framework should include dispute resolution mechanisms, such as dedicated mediation or arbitration processes, to provide peaceful means for settling maritime territorial or jurisdictional disagreements before they escalate.
6. To ensure regular improvement of coordination between ASEAN and the Quad, Japan should ensure that a periodic review and updating process takes place to ensure all stakeholders are satisfied with coordination between the groupings. The framework

should have provisions for periodic review and updating to ensure it remains responsive to evolving regional dynamics and security challenges. Regular consultations between ASEAN, Quad members, and other stakeholders would be essential.

By establishing such a comprehensive regional crisis management framework, Japan could help ASEAN and Quad countries develop shared protocols, enhance communications, and promote stability in the maritime domain. This could be a crucial step in avoiding unintended conflicts amid the broader US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

ASEAN and the Quad are neither antagonistic nor in competition. ASEAN's raison d'être continues to be preserving its strategic autonomy, promoting development, and avoiding taking sides between the US and China. In contrast, the Quad was born in the wake of the 2004 tsunami, initially focusing on public good provision in the form of search and rescue and humanitarian and disaster relief. This founding purpose remains true today, with the lion share of the Quad's efforts on public good provision in the Indo-Pacific. It is also expanding its focus to cooperation in maritime security and the protection of sea lines of communication.

Japan's trusted, longstanding, and proximate relations with ASEAN, along with its joint leadership role within the Quad, make it an ideal candidate to bridge these two institutions and contribute to peace, prosperity, and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. However, this role is not guaranteed. Japan's weakening economy, demographic challenges, and leadership instability may weaken Tokyo's ability to bridge ASEAN and the Quad, despite its potential to do so and strong relationships with both institutions.

This role may become more complicated if the next US president adopts a less ASEAN-focused approach and consistently pursues the

"America First" policy. This is opposed to the Biden administration approach, which has engaged constructively with ASEAN both independently and through its close ally, Japan. Regional conflicts and the connectivity of war associated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Palestinian conflict may also destabilize ASEAN's economic, energy, and food security, changing its immediate priorities and making it more difficult for Japan to act as a bridge between ASEAN and the Quad.

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37
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