

**Who's Chasing Whom?**  
**Vietnam-US Relations and Theories of Alignment and Alliance**

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**Abstract: Who's Chasing Whom?**

Do small powers seek powerful patrons when faced by an external threat? Or do large powers pursue smaller powers in order to extend their own hegemony and influence? Most theory assumes that the demand for alliance by the smaller power exceeds the supply of alliance from the larger power. Yet it could be that the large power seeks allies because of its hegemonic ambitions, not that the smaller power seeks a patron because of local external threats. In this article, we offer a unified logic that incorporates interests and perspectives of both the small and the large powers. We argue that alignment is a result of primarily two factors: first, whether the small power feels an intense or existential external threat; and second, whether the larger power has hegemonic ambitions. These two variables interact to shape the pattern of interaction – who's chasing whom – and allows scholars to be more specific in the scope conditions for when and why we might expect to see alignment. We illustrate these dynamics through a “hard case” – Vietnam and its relationship with China and the U.S. An original dataset on Vietnamese high-level exchanges provides systematic evidence about patterns of high-level exchange between Vietnam and large powers. We find that the U.S. is chasing Vietnam, not the other way around. We also find ample evidence that Vietnam faces a low external threat, and that the United States is motivated by a desire to retain or extend its hegemony.

**Word Count: 12,070**

‘Every Vietnamese leader must be able to stand up to China and get along with China and if anyone thinks this cannot be done at the same time, he does not deserve to be a leader.’

- Senior Vietnamese official, 2016<sup>1</sup>

## **I. Introduction and Puzzle**

When do small powers seek powerful patrons? Why do they sometimes not seek a patron?

The traditional international relations literature on alliances often assumes that when a smaller country faces a powerful adversary, the smaller state is likely to pursue an alliance with a powerful patron to counterbalance that threat. Yet the literature actually makes a number of assumptions about the strategic logic of the situation that in reality places quite restrictive scope and boundary conditions on the phenomena to be studied. Most importantly, much of the literature on alliances assumes that the small power faces a clear and major external threat. For instance, Hans Morgenthau (1948, 175) implies a severe external threat when he explores how nations can increase their security: “They can add to their own power [through armaments], they can add to their own power the power of other nations [through alliances], or they can withhold the power of other nations from the adversary [again, through alliances].” Yet positing an external threat places a fairly restrictive scope condition on the applicability of the theory.

Further embedded is the assumption that the demand for alliance by the smaller power exceeds the supply of alliance from the larger power. Classics such as James Morrow’s (1993, 209) seminal work on the tradeoff between arms and alliances, for example, notes that “Major powers fear both entrapment and abandonment by their allies....bind yourself too tightly to your ally and you invite entrapment, too loosely and you tempt abandonment.” Implied in Morrow’s

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Kausikan, Bilahari. “Dodging and Hedging in Southeast Asia.” *The American Interest* 12(5). January 12, 2017. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/01/12/dodging-and-hedging-in-southeast-asia/>.

conceptualization of the strategic dilemma is the small power's desire for large power alliance. Indeed, these twin assumptions of small power's fear and large power's reluctance are often assumed in three major themes of the alliance literature – free-riding, entrapment, and abandonment - even though they are central to the causal logic that drives the subsequent analysis.

These assumptions can drive empirical analysis in consequential ways. In East Asia, for example, it is widely argued that small countries such as Vietnam are actively seeking the protection of the United States against a rapidly growing China. As Yehri-Milo and her co-authors (2016, 138) argue, “China’s rapid military modernization and increasingly assertive behavior will likely fuel the perception that the United States and many regional states have common security interests...Vietnam could become a major security partner of the United States,” while Liff and Ikenberry (2014, 81) argue that “U.S.-Vietnam military ties are deepening rapidly...and Vietnam is also reaching out to U.S. allies.” These perspectives assume an external threat from China, and also assume Vietnam’s first or most obvious reaction is to actively seek protection from the United States. These views, directly derived from the conventional theoretical literature noted above, also see the United States is reluctant, passive, and merely reacting to Vietnam’s entreaties. However, does the Vietnamese case actually meet the restrictive criteria and scope conditions to expect that it will seek a closer relationship with the U.S.? Is Vietnam chasing the United States because it fears a rising China? Or is the U.S. pursuing Vietnam in order to extend or retain its own hegemonic ambitions?

Who’s chasing whom?

In fact, it is just as likely that the larger power seeks allies, not the smaller power. Large powers often have ambitions, and often pursue smaller powers in order to extend their own

influence, to create and sustain a hegemonic presence, or to compete with another large power for influence. Yet conventional international relations alliance theories are relatively silent on this possibility. Most of the literature takes the perspective of the large power and ignores or assumes the interests and perspective of the small power. Smaller powers may not actually have as severe external threats as is often assumed. Smaller powers also have a surprising amount of autonomy and agency in crafting their foreign policies. There are in fact sound theoretical reasons to expect that smaller powers might not desire close relations with a larger power. Most importantly, an external threat needs to be shown, not assumed: a small power near a larger power does not automatically mean the small power fears the large power. In fact, a small power may be cautious about making any firm *ex ante* commitment to a third larger power that approaches it. If the larger power can abrogate its responsibilities at any time, the smaller power can likely be left *ex post* having annoyed a third party, but with no alliance support from its larger ally. Actively seeking relations with one large power against another will reinforce the perception and designation of that third power as an adversary.

In this article, we offer a unified logic that incorporates interests and perspectives of both the small and the large powers. We argue that alignment, or alliance, is a result of primarily two factors: first, whether the small power feels an intense or existential external threat; and second, whether the larger power has hegemonic ambitions. These two variables interact to shape the pattern of interaction – who’s chasing whom – and allows scholars to be more specific about the scope conditions for when and why we might expect to see partners or even alliances. Our analysis thus challenges the notion that small powers consistently seek a large power patron simply because another large power is a factor in the small power’s security calculations. Instead, who’s chasing whom depends on the relative weight of these two variables, while the direction

of pursuit between large and small powers can often involve the larger power pursuing the smaller power.

We illustrate this logic through granular analysis of a key empirical case: Vietnam's relationship with the United States. Contra the conventional wisdom cited above, we find that Vietnam is not particularly worried about its relationship with China, and indeed faces no existential threat from China, and therefore Vietnam is cautious in its relationship with the United States. For its part, the U.S. is eager to retain its hegemonic position in East Asia, and is perhaps even attempting to create an incipient containment coalition against China. In short, there is strong empirical evidence to conclude that in the case of Vietnam-US relationship, it is the great power that is the suitor, while Vietnam is hesitant to embrace such pursuit.

We arrive at this conclusion by examining in-depth interactions between Vietnam and the U.S. Specifically, we explore who initiates invitations to Vietnamese leaders and where Vietnamese leaders choose to travel to provide insight into the direction of pursuit in relationship building. By constructing an original dataset on Vietnamese high-level exchanges, we present a series of hypotheses concerning how the high-level exchange patterns are different when small powers are the suitors versus when they are being pursued. The data and two in-depth case studies reveal that it is the U.S. that often initiates and reiterates invitations to Vietnamese leaders to visit the U.S., while Vietnamese responses are often cautious and restricted. In addition, the U.S. has paid more outgoing visits to the Vietnam rather than the way around. We also find that the interaction between Vietnam and its neighboring countries in the region such as Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand is much more vibrant than examined in existing literature.

Clarifying the direction of pursuit has surprisingly fundamental theoretical and empirical implications. Theoretically, the bulk of the alliance literature is actually more truncated than is

often assumed, and the particular class of models that explores small power-large power alliances is less applicable than normally recognized. Most of the time, countries are not actively seeking or engaged in alliance politics. IR scholars should be more cautious about applying these models empirically. Furthermore, although much of the literature focuses mainly on one actor or the other, our theory specifically incorporates the goals and perspectives of both large and small powers, for a more fully dynamic treatment. By providing a simple causal argument for when small power and large powers seek alignment, we are able to more robustly theorize about how alignment politics operate. More broadly, our argument contributes to the growing literature on alliances, external threats, and alignment by specifying more clearly the scope conditions under which we would expect a number of different strategies from both small and large powers. Together, our theory and empirical analysis demonstrates how variation in both external threat and hegemonic ambition combine to lead to a variety of alignment and alliance outcomes.

Empirically, the case of Vietnam shows that East Asian security is more stable than popularly believed. There is an emerging pessimistic consensus that East Asia is “racing toward tragedy,” and that countries fear a rising China (Liff and Ikenberry 2014; Goldstein 2013, 50, 55, 89; Allison 2017). Yet if our research is correct, even small powers sharing borders with China are exhibiting few signs of fear or external threat. If this is the case, then large swaths of our scholarly literature on East Asian security needs to be abandoned or at least modified (Kang 2017; Kang and Bang 2016, Kang and Ma 2017).

The research presented here focuses on only one case, so it cannot be conclusive about the differing effects of external threat and hegemonic ambition on alignment structures. An ideal research design would find four cases that fit the presence or absence of the two independent variables of external threat and ambition, and test all possible outcomes. In the conclusion we

provide illustrative examples of other possible cases as avenues for further research. However, the Vietnam case is an important, probative case that is useful for theory building on its own. Theoretically, it is an ideal test because it is a smaller power that is not pursuing the larger power. Substantively, Vietnam is widely considered a lynchpin in East Asian security, and has often been used as a key indicator of how the region is responding to China and the U.S. Although there has been extensive policy discussion of Vietnam's foreign policy, there has been little systematic scholarly research on Vietnam's situation – surprising given its outsized role in East Asian security.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In section II, we review the extant literature on the relationship between small and great powers and identify the problematic assumptions embedded in this literature. In section III, we present our theory and hypotheses, and the findings from our original data on Vietnamese high-level exchanges. To contextualize the exchanges, we trace two cases in the fourth section to further flesh out our argument: the historic visit of Vietnamese Party General Secretary to the U.S. in July 2015, and the opening of Cam Ranh International Port in March 2015. By showing that in both cases the U.S. is the suitor, while Vietnam has tended to respond with restraint and hesitation, we conclude that the causality of relationship between large and small powers runs the opposite way than is usually theoretically expected. In appendices we specify in greater detail the measures, data, coding procedures, potential limitations and additional robustness tests that we employed to address these limitations of our empirical research.

## **II. Large Powers, Small Powers, and the Direction of Pursuit**

It is perhaps not unfair to characterize the common wisdom of alliance theory as taking for granted that small countries will seek a powerful patron, *if it is afraid of a third country*. In other words, the direction of pursuit is assumed to be from small power to a big power. The small power should be reaching out, making offers, and trying to entice the large power to ally with it against a third country. Much of the literature shares this crucial assumption: the demand for alliance by the smaller power exceeds the supply of alliance from the larger power. Indeed, three main dilemmas identified by the alliance literature – free-riding, entrapment and abandonment – imply, to various degrees, that the small power wants the alliance more than the larger power, and explore the hazards large and small powers face in those circumstances. For example Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper (2016, 90) specifically explore a “...patron’s fear of being dragged into an undesirable war....[and] a client’s fears of abandonment.” If abandonment emphasizes the assumption that the smaller power wants an alliance with the larger power but fears that the large power will not support it, entrapment highlights the reluctance of a larger power to closely ally with a smaller power. Because they are reluctant, great powers can “insert loopholes into alliance agreements, sidestep costly commitments, maintain a diversified alliance portfolio.” (Beckley 2015, 9. For counter-arguments, see Kim 2011).

Furthermore, the dilemma of “free-riding” conceptualizes the security provided by alliances essentially as a collective good (Olson and Zeckhauser 1993, 214; Cha 1999), and the collective-action logic implies that free riding is “particularly attractive if the country is militarily weak compared to its partners” (Weisiger 2016, 755-6). As Resnick (2013, 674-5) writes, “The disproportionately weak members will free ride on the efforts of the strong members or the strong members will resent bearing the brunt of the war effort on behalf of the weak members, or both.” (See also Weitsman 2003, 84-85; Goldstein 1995, 40-1; Posen 2013,



118; Conybeare 1994; Resnick 2010; Hansen, Murdoch, and Sandler 1990). As Plümper and Neumayer (2015, 250) summarizes, “the theory of free-riding in military alliances predicts that smaller allies exploit the hegemon.”

Empirically, the important debate on U.S. grand strategy in Asia – “deep engagement” versus “offshore balancing” – is essentially about the disproportionate costs and risks that can be imposed on the United States, as other nations free ride on its security guarantees and provoke unnecessary conflicts (Montgomery 2014, 120; Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky 1997; Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012; Layne 2006; Gvosdev and Tanner 2004). For the proponents of retrenchment, U.S. alliances are traps that “risk roping the United States into conflicts over strategically marginal territory,” and the contemporary U.S. alliance system in East Asia is similar to the “tangled mess of European security commitments” that helped catalyze World War I. (Posen 2013, 5; Chong and Hall 2014, 19)

In short, by assuming the demand for alliance by the smaller power always exceeds the supply of alliance from the larger power, the motivations of the large power are often not interrogated carefully. What if the approach is the other way? What if it is the large power that actively pursues smaller partners? After all, leaders need followers. Hegemons need supportive allies. In this case, the large power also needs to actively seek local or regional partners, hoping for symbolic or even material support from local small countries to establish hegemony. In other words, hegemony leadership does not come into existence *sui generis*, but rather is created. Creating hegemony and leadership is an active choice, and large powers are subject to “imperial overstretch” precisely because their ambition leads them to pursue ever greater influence and ever greater overseas commitments (Gilpin 1981; Kennedy 1989). It can also be a result of domestic politics that pushes leaders to be overly ambitious (Snyder 1993), or pressure from self-

interested groups, such as ethnic group with a powerful attachment to a foreign power, or elites with large economic interests in the allied state, to support their individual self-interest (Walt 1997, 165).

In addition, the existing literature is unclear about another assumption that is central to the causal logic that drives their subsequent analysis: the existence of an external threat. Walt (1997, 158) argues that “Alliances are most commonly regarded as a response to an external threat...and will dissolve whenever there is a significant shift in the level of threat.” Weitsman (2003, 82) also posits the level of threat as one of the principal explanations of alliance formation, though the relationship between threat and alliance formation is curvilinear. However, what if the smaller power faces no threat? Absent a severe external threat, there would be little reason for a small power to pursue alliance. In other words, the scope conditions that define the space of possible alliance structures is much more limited than normally realized. If there is no external threat, then the assumption that a small powers seeks a larger ally is probably moot. Much rests critically on the smaller power’s external security environment. Yet this is often assumed, not theorized or empirically shown.

From the perspective of a small power, a small power should be wary about too obviously choosing sides – after all, why antagonize powerful country A if powerful country B is not necessarily your friend? Smaller powers have a surprising amount of autonomy and agency in their foreign policies. If the threat is not existential, it is not clear that a smaller power will seek an alliance to mitigate it. A smaller power may also fear abandonment by the larger power, and thus it may be very cautious about making any firm *ex ante* commitment to a larger power. If the larger power can abrogate its responsibilities at any time, the smaller power can very likely be left *ex post* having annoyed a third party, but with no alliance support from its larger ally.

Furthermore, to actively seek relations with one large power against another third power is to clarify and reinforce the perception and designation of that third power as an adversary, and will unnecessarily restrict any space for hedging that the small power may be attempting to achieve (Goh 2013; Goh 2016). It is quite likely that a smaller power may want to hold off as long as possible in making that designation.

Being aware of the twin assumptions of hegemonic ambition and external threat, we argue that alignment, or alliance, is a result of primarily two factors: first, whether the small power feels an intense or existential external threat; and second, whether the larger power has hegemonic ambitions. These two variables interact to shape the pattern of interaction – who’s chasing whom. Turning them into dichotomous independent variables allows us to create a 2x2 matrix that specifies more clearly the scope conditions under which we would expect varied strategies from both small and large powers (Figure 1).

Figure 1: External Threat and Hegemonic Ambition

		Large power: Hegemonic ambition	
		Yes	No
Small power: External threat	Yes	Mutual: Japan-US	Typical: SP chase LP
	No	LP chase SP: Vietnam-US	None

In the upper left hand quadrant, the smaller power faces an external threat, while the larger power has hegemonic ambitions. In this case, both large and small powers want an alliance or alignment of some type. This does not obviate alliance issues such as free-riding or abandonment, but the incentive for working out the alliance are high on both sides. Empirically, this is characterized in East Asia by the US-Japan alliance especially during the Abe administration.

Perhaps the most studied, and theorized, quadrant, is the upper right quadrant: the large power is reluctant, while the small power is eager. In this case, the small power faces an external threat and seeks the support of a large power, but the large power is hesitant to involve itself in issues that do not directly affect it. This might be considered the default expectation about alliances, and has been extensively studied by the existing literature.

In the lower right quadrant, the large power has no ambition, the small power faces no threat. In this case, we would not expect any alignment or alliance issues to appear at all. This would put both countries outside the scope conditions for engaging in alignment or alliance.

Finally, the lower left quadrant denotes the situation in which the large power has hegemonic ambitions but the small power faces no external threat. In this case, we expect the larger power to pursue the smaller power, and the smaller power to be somewhat reluctant, especially if it has other possible large power relationships. This is also the focus of analysis in this paper.

### **III. High Level Visits as Indicators of Pursuit**

To illustrate the theoretical issues of who's chasing whom, we explore the high-level diplomatic visits - a scarce resource - between Vietnam and the U.S. Though ideally one would

empirically test for all four cases to show the variation in combinations of independent variables, we choose to focus on Vietnam as a vivid illustrative case, because Vietnam is widely considered a lynchpin in East Asian security, and has often been used as a key indicator of how the region is responding to China and the U.S.

Following the literature, we define “high-level exchange” as an exchange between officials of at least two countries at the ministerial level or above. To date, high-level exchange has been used as indicators to gauge important issues of international security, as it often requires tradeoffs of prioritizing certain destinations over others, the high opportunity cost of leaders’ absence from their normal duties, and the mobilization and commitment of a significant level of scarce diplomatic resources. (Kastner and Saunders 2012, 165; Cha and Lim 2017). Lebovic and Saunders (2016) systematically assess explanations for the distribution of high-level diplomatic visits. In our paper, we use the direction of such exchange as a measure of who is the suitor. An outgoing visit from Vietnam to a particular country indicates Vietnam is pursuing that country, while an incoming visit to Vietnam from a particular country indicates Vietnam is being pursued.

### *Hypotheses*

The high stakes involved in the high-level exchanges then lead to a series of falsifiable hypotheses regarding the empirical observations of state behavior: If the smaller power is pursuing support of a larger power, then we would expect to find that leaders of the smaller power are more likely, *ceteris paribus*, to visit the great powers than other states. Furthermore, we should find that the larger power is wary of accepting that visit, being entrapped into a war with another major power in which it has marginal interests or strategic importance. By contrast, if the small power is being pursued, we expect to find that the smaller power is cautious about

too obviously or closely aligning itself with the larger power, while the larger power will be attempting to convince or cajole the smaller power into more obviously aligning with it. This leads to the first hypothesis:

*H1: If a small power is being pursued by a large power, then leaders of the large power will visit the small power more frequently than the other way around.*

A corollary of this is that if the small power is pursuing the larger power, the leaders of the small power could also be more likely to court the regional allies of the larger power. For instance, while we would expect that Vietnam might interact more with its neighboring countries regardless of its intentions, finding that Vietnam has made particular efforts to engage the regional allies of the U.S. would indicate its pursuit of large power. This then leads to the second hypothesis:

*H2: If a small power is being pursued by a large power, then leaders of the regional allies of the large power will visit the small power more frequently than the other way around.*

To test these hypotheses, we constructed an original dyadic dataset on high-level exchanges of Vietnam from January 1, 2009 to June 30, 2016. For each visit, we coded the date, the locale, host country, visiting country, the positions and names of the Vietnamese leaders, the positions and names of the foreign leaders, and brief remarks that outline the nature or the major theme of that visit. Appendix I lists data sources, coding scheme and all the specific ministries of the government and departments under the Central Committee of Communist Party in relevant countries that are included in our dataset. Appendix II specifies potential limitations and additional robustness tests that we employed to address the potential limitations of this data. Altogether, this original data allows us a sufficiently long time frame to explore patterns and changes in the relationship within the larger strategic situation of East Asian security.

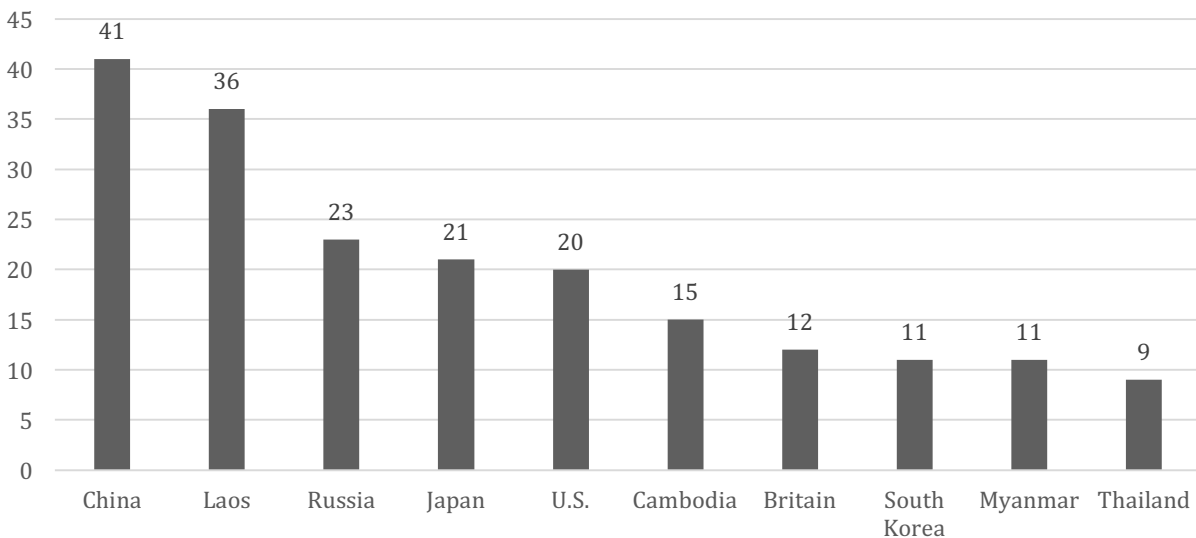
## *Findings from High-Level Exchanges*

### *H1: Exchanges between Small Powers and the Large Powers*

An *ex ante* hypothesis of who is chasing whom is that if the small power were being pursued, then leaders of the large power will pay more visits to the small power than the other way around. It would also follow that the total number of exchanges between Vietnam and the large power should be higher than that between Vietnam and other countries, and that Vietnam should receive more incoming high-level visits from the large powers than it sends.

Figure 2 shows the top 10 countries that have most high-level exchanges with Vietnam (incoming and outgoing combined) over the years from 2009 through 2016.

Figure 2: Overall Frequency of High-level Exchanges (2009-2016)



Two observations against the conventional wisdom immediately stand out. First, despite the increasing tension assumed in the literature between China and Vietnam, the overall frequency of high-level exchanges between these two countries is far higher than most countries.

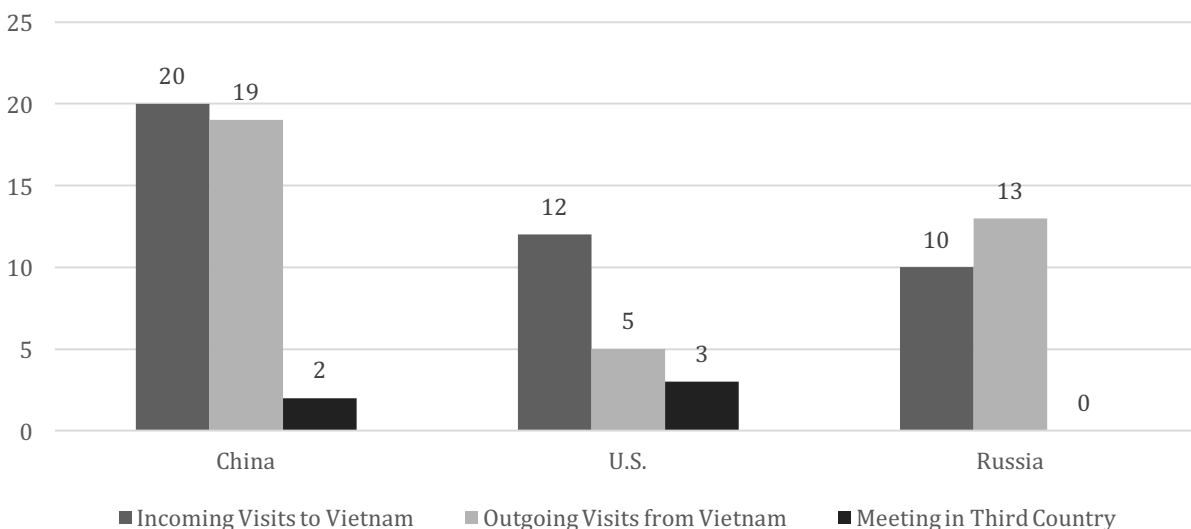
Second, the country that interacts second-most frequently with Vietnam is not a large power such as Russia or the U.S., but a small power that sits next to Vietnam on the Southeast Asian mainland – Laos. A closer examination of these exchanges reveals that they are not only frequent, but also very high-profile. For instance, after coming in office in April 2016, the first-ever foreign activity made by Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang as the State President was his visit to Laos in June 2016. (Voice of Vietnam 2016a) Three months later, the Vietnamese Prime Minister met again with Lao Party General Secretary and President on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit, observed that “Vietnam always gives the top priority to the special solidarity with Laos,” and pledged that he would instruct ministries, agencies and localities to continue realizing high-level agreements between the two countries. (Voice of Vietnam 2016b)

The breakdown of the high-level exchanges (Figure 3) further demonstrates the direction of the pursuit. Specifically, among the three traditionally defined large powers in the above top 10 countries, we found that both China and the U.S. have to date initiated more visits to Vietnam than the way around, lending support to our first hypothesis that the small power is actually being pursued by the large power in the case of Vietnam. For instance, in 2010 alone, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Hanoi twice in July and October, respectively, reiterating the Obama Administration’s commitment “to broad, deep, and sustained engagement in Asia.” (US Department of State 2010) In addition to her visits, the US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates also visited Hanoi in October 2010, with the aim to “advance the defense ties...and to establish a broader set of more practical cooperation activities with the Vietnamese military and defense establishment.” (US Department of Defense 2010) The allocation of three high-level visits to Vietnam within such a short period of time clearly shows the desire of the U.S. to have a closer and more comprehensive relationship with Vietnam, a country that is, according to



Pentagon Press Secretary Geoff Morrell, “a close and leading U.S. partner in Southeast Asia.”  
(Pession 2010)

Figure 3: Incoming versus Outgoing High-level Exchanges between Vietnam and Large Powers



Comparing the pattern of high-level exchanges between China and Vietnam with that between the U.S. and Vietnam reveals a third observation that is against the conventional wisdom: we find no evidence that Vietnam is pursuing the U.S. to balance or hedge against China. On the contrary, the high frequency of total exchanges and the roughly equal amounts of incoming and outgoing visits between Vietnam and China both indicate that instead of allying with the U.S., Vietnam is more inclined to rely on bi-lateral exchanges and dialogues with China to exchange views between the two Parties and the two countries. For instance, in the first six months of 2016, Vietnamese Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister have already paid 2 visits to China to meet with their counterparts. Meanwhile, Chinese Defense Minister and State Councilor also visited Vietnam respectively in March and June, and were received by Vietnamese Defense Minister, Vietnamese President and the Communist Party

General-Secretary. Joint statements issued during these exchanges emphasize multiple times that Vietnam and China both view the maintaining of regular high-level contacts between the two parties and states as key to strengthen political trust, and will continue to make visits on a regular basis, send Special Envoys, talk on the hotline, organize annual meetings, and hold meetings on the sidelines of multilateral forums to promptly exchange views on regional and international issues of shared concern. (Viet Nam News 2015)

The following example illustrates the atmosphere and the implications of these exchanges between China and Vietnam. In 2014, a 13-member high-level Vietnamese military delegation, led by its Minister of National Defense General Phung Quang Thanh, visited his counterparts in Beijing. Apart from usual pleasantries, General Thanh proposed five ways to rebuild confidence and trust with reassurance that “force would not be used.” (Thayer 2014) Reciprocally, General Fan Changlong, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission and member of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo, urged the two militaries to contribute “positive energy.” Fan emphasized, “A neighboring country cannot be moved away... We should make our troops well-behaved.” (Xinhua News 2014) As Carl Thayer points out, during these meetings, military commanders of the border and at sea on both sides had the chance to meet their respective counterparts. “These commanders have all witnessed the verbal understandings reached by their respective ministers. Military commanders on both sides can be expected to carry out their duties accordingly.” (Thayer 2014)

In summary, examining the exchanges between Vietnam and large powers reveal three findings: first, the interaction between Vietnam and its neighboring small powers are far more frequent and high-profile than examined in existing literature. Second, exchanges between Vietnam and large powers especially the U.S. are asymmetric, with more active pursuit from the

large powers, especially when it comes to security and defense exchanges led by military and security officials. Third, no evidence is found that Vietnam is pursuing the U.S. to balance or hedge against China. Instead, compared to the relationship between Vietnam and the U.S., the interaction between Vietnam and China is more frequent and balanced, with a mutual understanding on the importance of direct dialogue through regular high-level exchanges on key issues.

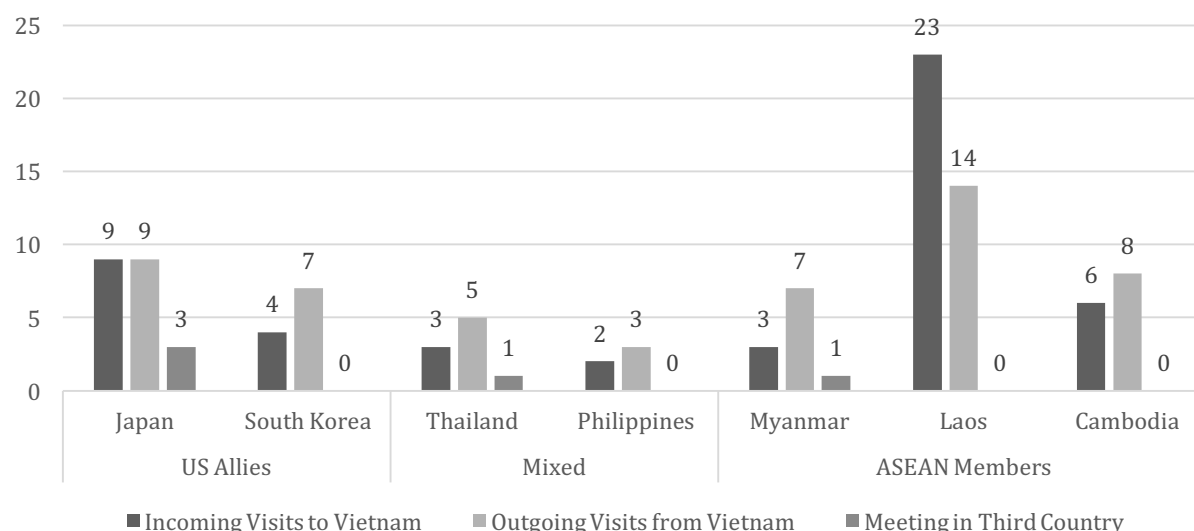
## *H2: Exchanges between Small Powers and the Allies of the Large Powers*

Hypothesis 2 explores the relationship between the small power and the regional allies of the large power. Specifically, it argues that if a small power were being pursued by a large power, leaders of the regional allies of the large power are more likely to pay visits to the small power than the way around. By contrast, if the small power were pursuing the large power, leaders of the small power will visit more frequently the regional allies of the large power, even in some cases more frequently than its own regional allies.

Figure 4 shows the exchanges between Vietnam and the regional allies of the U.S., compared to the exchanges between Vietnam and selected ASEAN members. Here, the pattern of high-level exchanges is mixed, thus being less in line with the expectations. While Vietnam has paid more visits to certain regional allies of the U.S., it has also paid more visits to other regional small powers especially the ASEAN members. For instance, though Vietnam has in total 7 outgoing visits to South Korea, it also has almost same amount of visits to Myanmar. Due to the unclear pattern shown in this result, we further reviewed the themes of these exchanges, so as to better clarify the purposes and dynamics in these exchanges. Results reveal that the exchanges between Vietnam and the regional allies of the U.S. are due to shared interests that are

unique to the bilateral relationship. An example is that Vietnamese exchanges with Japan and South Korea have been focusing on financing the development of the Cambodia-Laos-Viet Nam Development Triangle Area (CLV-DTA), as well as official development assistance (ODA) for Vietnamese socio-economic development, thus are not necessarily framed by the U.S. factor.

Figure 4: High-level Exchanges between Vietnam, ASEAN Members, and Regional Allies of the U.S.<sup>2</sup>



We now summarize the findings from data on high-level exchanges: First, if standard theories are correct, the weaker and more vulnerable country (Vietnam) should be the one initiating and pursuing closer relations with the larger power (the United States). However, the exchanges between Vietnam and the U.S. is far more actively initiated by the latter, while the large difference in the amount of incoming versus outgoing visits signals that the direction of pursuit in the case of Vietnam and the U.S. is opposite of what is assumed in traditional literature.

Second, we find no evidence that Vietnam has joined a containment coalition against China. On the contrary, the high-level exchanges between China and Vietnam are more regular

<sup>2</sup> Allies are defined as based on the U.S. Collective Defense Arrangements. Source: US Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/s/l/treaty/collectivedefense/>.

and frequent than that between Vietnam and any other major powers, thus opening more channels for direct exchange of views on concerned issues between these two parties and countries. This indicates that, instead of balancing or hedging with the U.S. against China, Vietnam, if not actively seeking, at least is consciously preserving direct dialogue with China.

Lastly, the interaction between Vietnam and its neighboring small powers are far more frequent and prominent than examined (or the lack thereof) in existing literature. This indicates that when allocating its limited diplomatic resources, small powers do not necessarily always prioritize large powers.

#### **IV. Case Studies**

We now turn to two cases to further illustrate that in the case of Vietnam, it is the U.S. who is the suitor that demands closer relationship, while Vietnam has been hesitant to embrace that pursuit. The two cases that we chose are the historic visit of Vietnamese Party General Secretary to the U.S. in July 2015, and the opening of Cam Ranh International Port in March 2015. To date, these two cases have been cited widely as evidence of Vietnam tilting toward the U.S. to balance against China. However, by showing that it is the United States that eagerly wishes to increase relations with Vietnam in both cases, we demonstrate that the causality of relationship between big and small powers runs the opposite way than is usually theoretically expected.

*Case 1: Unwilling to Balance against China: Vietnamese Party General Secretary's Visit to the U.S.*

In July 2015, the United States hosted the first-ever visit by the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party Nguyen Phu Trong. This “groundbreaking” visit has been lauded as a tipping point in the U.S.-China-Vietnam triangle, a major step forward in the quiet yet profound shift in both Vietnam’s foreign policies and domestic politics (Vuving 2015). However, what is often overlooked is that Vietnam officials often visit China right before they visit the United States. This case was no different. Vietnam was hesitant to embrace the U.S. invitation, and engaged in careful management of Chinese perceptions before embarking for the U.S. Furthermore, Vietnam-U.S. meetings are often more symbolic than substantive.

The Obama administration’s invitation to the Party General Secretary to visit the U.S. was first made public by the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on February 14, 2015, during a telephone conversation<sup>3</sup> with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh for Lunar New Year’s greetings. (Asia News Monitor 2015) On February 23, this invitation was again discussed when Vietnamese Ambassador to the U.S. Pham Quang Vinh presented his credentials to President Barack Obama at the White House. (Vietnam Embassy in the U.S. 2015) The Party General Secretary’s visit to the U.S. wasn’t confirmed until later by Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 25, 2015, with no confirmed date for the visit yet at that point. (TuoiTre News 2015)

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<sup>3</sup> During the lunar new year celebration of 2015, Vietnam had only three phone conversation with foreign countries: China, Japan, and the U.S. The phone talk with China was between Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping on February 11, during which they agreed to visit their respective countries in 2015. Conversation with Japan was between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, during which Japan committed to continuing to provide official development assistance (ODA) for Vietnamese socio-economic development and TPP. Conversation with the U.S. was conducted by Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister, who has lowest ranking in terms of official profiles.

However, after confirming his U.S. visit, the General Secretary first went to Beijing in April, three months before his visit to Washington. During his four-day visit, the Party leader met with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, Premier Li Keqiang, Chairman of the National People's Congress Zhang Dejiang, and Chairman of the Chinese People's Consultative Conference Yu Zhengsheng, with a particular theme of "enhancing the political trust in each other." (Xinhua News 2015a) Commentary published by Xinhua News Agency, China's state-run news agency, on Nguyen Phu Trong's visit is instructive. Title "No room for wedge in China-Vietnam relations," the commentary reads,

"The timing of the trip is riveting...it takes place ahead of a Washington-announced visit by Trong to the United States...top-level diplomacy between Beijing and Hanoi sends out a clear albeit delicate message... Beijing and Hanoi are mature enough to handle their relations beyond the bilateral scope. They will not chase after other interests at the cost of China-Vietnam relations, nor will they allow anybody to drive a wedge between them. Interpretations of Trong's expected U.S. trip as a move to counterbalance China smell of Cold War-era machination and confrontationalism, which should have long been dumped to the dustbin of history...China unequivocally encourages its neighbors to follow development paths and cultivate foreign relations in line with their respective realities. And it is widely accepted common sense that such pursuits should be conducive both to national development and to regional peace." (Xinhua News 2015b)

Vietnamese state-run news agency VNA, as well as the newspaper of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nhan Dan (The People), also sent out similar messages. For example, the Vietnamese official perspective was that the trip:

...aims to continue solidifying and maintaining the friendly and stable situation, creating more momentum for healthy China-Vietnam relations and creating favorable conditions to continue resolving disputes between the two countries, contributing to the maintenance and consolidation of a peaceful and stable environment for national development and construction. (Nhan Dan 2015)

Following Trong's visit to Beijing, and before his visit to the U.S., there were two

additional high-level exchanges between Vietnam and China. During these visits, China's State Councilor Yang Jiechi, who outranks China's Foreign Minister, Premier Li Keqiang, Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh in Beijing and Hanoi, respectively. The importance of regular meetings between the two countries' high-level leaders to enhance political trust was emphasized in each exchange, with multiple initiatives being set up to strengthen cooperation between ministries, sectors and localities. In addition, both sides have committed to effectively using government-level negotiation mechanisms for the Vietnam-China territorial border, and to avoiding any actions that complicate disputes in the South China Sea.

In fact, we often observe meetings between Vietnamese and Chinese leaders to precede those between leaders of Vietnam and the U.S. For instance, Vietnamese State President Truong Tan Sang visited the U.S. for the first time in July 2013. During that visit, President Truong Tan Sang and President Obama announced their decision to "form a U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership to provide an overarching framework for advancing the relationship." (White House 2013) However, President Truong Tan Sang had visited China one month earlier in June as his first-ever visit as the Head of State. (Vietnam News 2013)

Another example is the postponed visit by President Obama to Vietnam. Back in 2015, when receiving Vietnam's Communist Party leader at the White House, President Obama pledged that he was looking forward to making his first visit to the nation "sometime in the future." (Nakamura 2015) Given President Obama was scheduled to attend an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in the Philippines and the East Asia Summit 2015 in Malaysia in November, it was widely expected that President Obama would visit also Vietnam to mark the 20th anniversary of US-Vietnam ties. (Boyer 2015; Bhadrakumar 2015) However,



Obama's trip was postponed, while Vietnam welcomed Chinese President Xi with red-carpet, despite the extremely short notice of Xi's intention to visit in November. To welcome Xi, Vietnam had to juggle the long-scheduled visits of the presidents of Italy and Iceland. (CCTV News 2015; Thayer 2016) In addition, Xi was the first world leader to send a special envoy to congratulate Nguyen in person after the 12<sup>th</sup> Party congress in January 2016, and the special envoy of Nguyen was the first foreign guest Xi met after the lunar new year in 2016. (Sun 2016)

A close examination and comparison of the joint statements issued during Vietnamese leaders' visits to China and to the U.S. further illustrates the lack of actual momentum in Vietnamese visits to the U.S. Back in July 2013, Vietnam's president and his US counterpart agreed on nine areas of cooperation including political and economic relations, security ties, human rights, and cooperation on tackling environmental issues. However, the majority of U.S.-Vietnam military cooperation since then only involved joint efforts to address war legacies, including Agent Orange/dioxin, unexploded ordnance, the search for remains of U.S. personnel missing in action (MIA) and the provision of information about Vietnamese soldiers missing in action. (Vietnam Ministry of Defense 2016) Even the annual Naval Exchange Activity (NEA), established in 2010, have been confined to noncombat training and skills exchanges in military medicine, search and rescue, maritime law, shipboard damage control, legal symposia, band concerts, community service events, and team sports. (Barta 2011; Commander Task Force 73 Public Affairs 2015) With that in mind, the joint statement issued during the 2016 visit again gave priority on "humanitarian cooperation, war legacy, maritime security, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief," as well as to work towards concluding the Trans-Pacific Partnership preferential trade pact. (White House 2015a)

Nor did this “ground-breaking” meeting advance the U.S.’s call for preferential access to Vietnam’s deep-sea port at Cam Ranh Bay. Right before Trong’s visit to the U.S., the U.S. had “urged Vietnamese officials to ensure that Russia is not able to use its access to Cam Ranh Bay to conduct activities that could raise tensions in the region”, including “provocative” flights near the US Pacific Ocean territory of Guam. (Reuters 2015a) However, consistent with its “three no’s” policy against foreign alliances, bases or reliance, Vietnam “had no immediate response to the U.S. requests” (Reuters 2015b), nor the alleged requests that the U.S. have exclusive foreign rights to the facilities. Thus, as Shawn Crispin points out, instead of being monumental as some are making it out to be, the 2016 visit at best advanced the budding “comprehensive partnership” launched in 2013, and still remains largely symbolic and limited. (Crispin 2015)

On the other hand, the joint statements issued between China and Vietnam included many more substantive cooperative projects. In the realm of military and security cooperation alone, the 2013 joint statement highlights the importance of maintaining high-level contacts between the two armies, especially the usage of the direct telephone line between the two defense ministries to enhance mutual trust. The statement also inked more joint land, sea, and naval patrols, based on the principles of easy things first and step-by-step, especially in the Tonkin Gulf. The two sides also agreed to stay calm and restrain themselves so as not to complicate and expand disputes. In the joint statement issued during Xi’s visit in 2015, the two sides spoke highly of the continued high-level exchanges between two armies, and have emphasized again the usage of the direct hotline between two defense ministries to manage and control crises at sea. They also expanded cooperation between the two armies to realms including Party and political affairs in the army, personnel training, joint patrols, visits by naval ships, as well as law enforcement at sea between the two countries' maritime police. Following these statements, the

coast guards of Vietnam and China conducted two joint patrol missions in 2016 alone (in April and November, respectively), and have conducted 12 joint law enforcement exercises in the common fishing zone since 2006. (Xinhua News 2016)

In short, the unprecedented visit of Vietnamese Party General Secretary has been lauded by the Western analysis as an indicator of Vietnam's pivoting towards the U.S., however, we found little evidence to support this argument. To be clear, we do not claim that Vietnam always seeks assurance from Beijing before moving closer to Washington. However, by pointing out that Vietnamese leaders often meet their Chinese counterparts prior to their meetings with the U.S. leaders, as well as the lack of substantive progress in defense cooperation after Vietnamese leaders' visits to the U.S., we argue that small powers like Vietnam can be, and have indeed been, very versatile and strategic in handling their relationships with the large powers. Instead of allying with one to balance or hedge against the other, they instead can have a surprising amount of autonomy and agency in maneuvering among large powers.

#### *Case 2: Active Pursuit from the U.S.: The Opening of Cam Ranh International Port*

The second case that we examine is the recent opening of Cam Ranh International Port. On March 8, 2016, Vietnam officially inaugurated an international port facility capable of receiving foreign warships at Cam Ranh Bay, a war-time naval base considered as the finest deepwater shelter in Southeast Asia. This, again, has been lauded as Vietnam's offering to the U.S. and its allies with the aim to signal and balance against an increasingly aggressive China. However, by tracing progress happening before this opening, we find that it is the United States that is asking for more access to naval bases and Cam Ranh Bay, while Vietnam has been

carefully evaluating the implication, and has been constantly refusing requests from the U.S. on exclusive foreign rights to the facilities.

U.S. warships began making port visits to Vietnam in November 2003 (Gordon 2003), but were limited to Saigon, Danang and Haiphong. The United States is keen to gain access to Cam Ranh Bay, arguably, that parallel its arrangements to ports elsewhere. However, given the delicate balance in its foreign policy approach, Vietnam has been cautious about developing over-reliance on any one major power on the security front. Thus, despite speculation, no actual evidence was revealed that Vietnam would allow this request.

The first breakthrough in accessing to Cam Ranh Bay was made in October 2010. At the closing conference of the 17th ASEAN summit in Hanoi, Vietnamese senior officials announced that Vietnam would rent out its services to foreign navies on a commercial basis. However, Vietnam also made it clear that it would be solely responsible for developing Cam Ranh Port, and will not cooperate with any country that wants to use the port for military purposes, let alone granting any single country all-access usage of the port facilities. (Thanhniem News 2010) By August 2011, when the first U.S. logistics vessel docked at the port for repairs, it appeared that Vietnam has declined U.S. interest to gain basing rights, storage or logistical arrangements at Cam Ranh Bay. (Baxter 2011)

The first symbolic trip made by the U.S. to visit Cam Ranh Bay was in June 2012, when the then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta recognized the 17th anniversary of the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam on the deck of the Military Sealift Command supply ship USNS Richard E. Byrd at Cam Ranh Bay. During his speech, Panetta reiterated that the United States would “work with our partners like Vietnam to be able to use harbors like this as we move our ships from our ports on the West Coast toward our stations here in the Pacific.”

“Access for United States naval ships into this facility is a key component of this relationship [with Vietnam] and we see a tremendous potential here for the future,” Panetta emphasized. (Baldor 2012)

In May 2014, the U.S. openly called upon Vietnam to permit more than the single annual U.S. Navy port visit to Vietnam that is currently allowed. As yet, the Vietnamese have not accepted the offer, saying “We’re talking to U.S. but it is too early to say how the tensions now will change our approach...We have a lot to consider”. (Reuters 2014) Although U.S. Defense Secretary Panetta asked the Vietnamese to create an “Office of Defense Cooperation” housed in the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam, the Vietnamese have not yet approved the request. (Thayer 2013) Even till the opening of Cam Ranh International Port, Vietnam only allows the U.S. Navy a single port visit each year, and bars U.S. Navy warships from entry to Cam Ranh Bay. Instead, Vietnam consistently advocates neither joining any military alliances nor giving any other countries permission to have military bases or use its soil to carry out military activities against other countries. (Vietnam Ministry of Defense 2013)

To further push for regular access to Vietnamese ports, the chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee has proposed a 2-2-3 plan – or the so-called “McCain Initiative” – an offer for a regular series of bilateral naval exercises in which a U.S. ship would conduct a two-day port visit to Da Nang, two days of at-sea exercises and three days of in-port visits at Cam Ranh Bay. (LaGrone 2016) Senator John McCain also sent a letter to Vietnamese Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong, in which he called for increased US Naval port visits to Vietnam and emphasized that he was “committed to helping build the maritime capacity of the Vietnamese Coast Guard and Navy.” (LaGrone 2016) Echoing that, the U.S. government has awarded Vietnam \$19.6 million in FY 2015 and \$20.5 million in FY 2016, respectively, as part of its

Maritime Security Initiative in order to “bolster its maritime Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and command and control within Vietnam’s maritime agencies.” (White House 2015b) Vietnam has not yet accepted this proposal, again one stemming from the United States, not Vietnam.

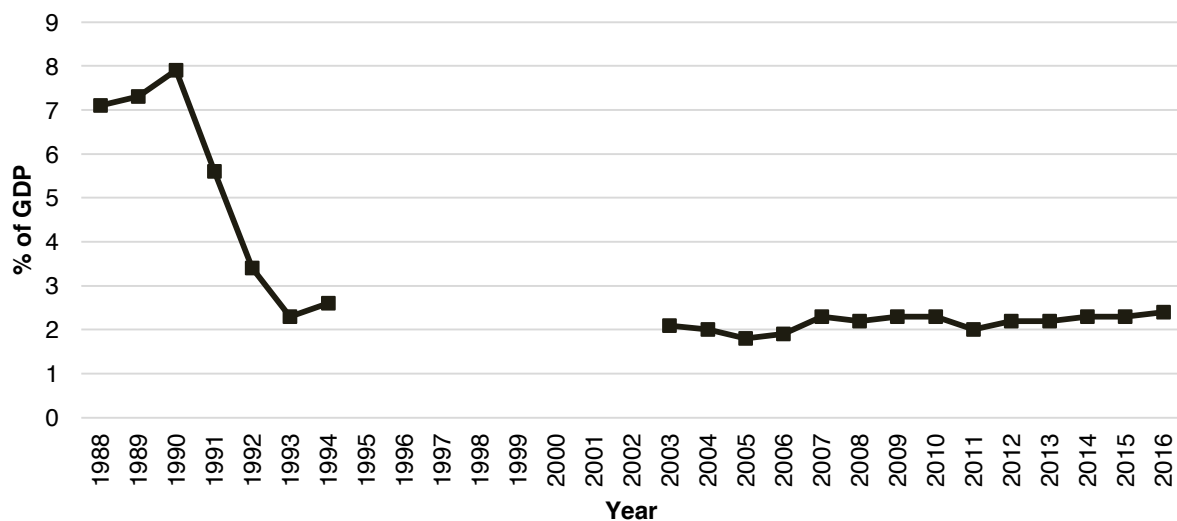
## **V. Explaining the Direction of Pursuit in US-Vietnam Relationship**

Our theory posits that alignment, or alliance, is a result of primarily two factors: whether the small power feels an existential external threat and whether the larger power has hegemonic ambitions. The original data on high-level exchanges and the two cases all demonstrate the United States as the ardent suitor, and that Vietnam is hesitant to embrace the pursuit from the U.S.

There is, in fact, good reason to think that Vietnam views its external security environment as relatively benign. Although Vietnam does have maritime disputes with China, both sides have been careful to contain the issue. Furthermore, those maritime disputes do not include an existential threat to Vietnam (Kang 2017, Chapter 6). Vietnam has actually rapidly improved its relationship with China over the past forty years. Following normalization of ties in 1991, Vietnam and China formally demarcated their land border by 1999, and trade has rapidly increased. China is now Vietnam’s largest trading partner by a large margin, and the close economic relationship between the two sides appears to be increasing rapidly. Vietnam has also steadily decreased its military expenditures as a proportion of its economy over the past three decades – *prima facie* evidence that the Vietnamese top leadership feels it can make tradeoffs that favor priorities other than defense spending (Figure 5). As Evelyn Goh notes that Vietnam’s leadership, especially the older generation, “still fears the subversive intent of the United

States” and is unwilling to trade Vietnam’s autonomy for risky permanent alignment with an offshore power.” (Goh 2016)

Figure 5: Vietnamese Defense Expenditures, 1988-2015 (% of GDP)



*Source: SIPRI 2016. Data is unavailable from 1995 to 2002.*

As for the United States, there is a wealth of evidence that its pursuit of countries such as Vietnam is a result of American hegemonic or leadership ambitions. Indeed, American discussion of American leadership, and the potential decline of that hegemonic position, are now a relatively common occurrence. Mark Valencia, for example, observes that “in the South China Sea...continuity of US domination of the region is the overall goal.” (Valencia 2017) The U.S. “pivot to Asia” was explicitly presented in terms of maintaining and extending U.S. hegemony. As President Obama said that “The Asia-Pacific region will continue its economic integration, with or without the United States. We can lead that process, or we can sit on the sidelines and watch prosperity pass us by.” (Obama 2016) Although President Trump has come into office with a different agenda, the overwhelming consensus in the U.S. remains that the America is the

indispensable power, and is required to lead the world. As Barry Posen describes it, there is a bipartisan consensus among mainstream foreign policy experts and leaders in the United States that “the United States should dominate the world militarily, economically, and politically....and needs to preserve its massive lead in the global balance of power, consolidate its economic preeminence, enlarge the community of market democracies, and maintain its outsized influence in the international institutions it helped create.” (Posen 2013, 116)

Rarely is the need or rationale for American preeminence ever articulated. Rather, the need for American primacy is usually taken as self-evident, as an end in itself, so obviously important that it need not be justified. Hegemony is taken for granted. The “Lessons of Munich” school sees every challenge to the US everywhere as interconnected, and thus the U.S. must respond anywhere it is challenged. This interventionist view believes that American credibility is fragile, thus requiring an extraordinary overkill response to every challenge. For example, despite calling for a reduced U.S. presence globally, even supposed realists like John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt unquestioningly accept the need for American primacy. In 2016 they asked “If China continues its impressive rise, it is likely to seek hegemony in Asia. The United States should undertake a major effort to prevent it from succeeding.... Ideally, Washington would rely on local powers to contain China, but that strategy might not work.... The United States will have to coordinate their efforts and may have to throw its considerable weight behind them.” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016)

There is broad consensus in the American mainstream policymaking establishment about the importance of continued American hegemony in Southeast Asia. For example, recent publications have asked “Have we already lost the South China Sea?” (Poling 2017) and “The U.S. is losing Asia to China,” (Ratner and Kumar 2017). But is Asia America’s to lose? What



does that mean, other than influence and leadership? Harry Kazianis (2016) further argues that the “Scarborough ‘Shoal down’” is “an opportunity to push back against China,” although how and to what end is not clear. Even under the Trump administration, there have been calls to increase defense expenditures and specifically spend more money on Asian military deployments (Brunnstrom 2017).

In sum, there is good reason to believe that Vietnam simply does not face as severe an external threat as is often posited by outside analysts. Vietnam faces no threat to its existence from any country, not even from China. It has stabilized its land borders and normalized relations with China and other neighbors in the forty years since the end of the Vietnam War. And, it has rapidly begun to expand its economic and diplomatic relations within the region. As for the United States, there is a wealth of evidence that it wishes to retain or extend its influence, hegemony, and leadership in the region. The unquestioned way that U.S. policymakers and scholars talk about the region is that it is the American’s to lose; and that it is unthinkable that any other country should have as much influence as the United States.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Most theory predicts that a small power will approach a large power. Yet the conditions under which this occurs is more often assumed than theorized. This article has argued that alignment, alliance, or partnership between large and small powers follow a clear strategic logic. In contrast to previous studies, which tend to focus solely on the perspective of the larger power, we find that it is the combination of both large and small powers’ interests and perspectives that fully explain the variety of alignment that occurs. The presence or absence of hegemonic ambition on the part of large powers, and the existence or absence of a severe external threat on

the part of the small power are the two key variables that explain this variation. This strategic logic helps to explain why often a smaller power is reluctant to embrace a larger powers' overtures. A granular examination of Vietnam's recent relations with the United States provides strong empirical support for our theory.

In this paper we have begun to directly interrogate the question of when and under what conditions do small or large powers pursue each other? In the case of Vietnam, it is the United States that is the ardent suitor, while Vietnam is hesitant to embrace the U.S. It is widely perceived that Vietnam fears China and is seeking to either balance or hedge with the U.S. against China. However, the revealed direction of pursuit urges us to redefine Vietnamese perceptions of China. Vietnam is hardly about to join a containment coalition against China, while its relationship with the U.S. is oceans away from actually being a military alliance. In addition, we find that the interaction between Vietnam and its neighboring countries in the region such as Laos is much more vibrant than examined in existing literature. We arrived at this conclusion by constructing an original dataset on Vietnamese high-level exchanges along with two in-depth case studies. We have demonstrated not only that the causality of relationship between big and small powers runs the opposite way than is usually theoretically expected, the dynamics within the region is also far more vibrant and stable than is usually expected. As Evelyn Goh points out, "Southeast Asian complicity with US hegemonic reassertion in the SCS has clearer limits than that of US allies in Northeast Asia. The desire for US strategic support aims to harness its superior coercive authority to pressure China into negotiating and abiding by binding conflict-avoidance norms with ASEAN, not to boost US hegemony per se." (Goh 2013, 112).

These findings have both theoretical and empirical implications. Theoretically, this study highlights several problematic assumptions in extant literature, including the often unquestioned assumption that the small power demands more alliance or support from a big power than the big power wants to supply. We have explicitly taken into consideration the perspectives and interests of both small and large powers. In addition, this study highlights the lack of systematic theories about when states feel external threats and when they do not, and when they care deeply about an issue and when they do not (Anders, Fariss, and Markowitz 2017). After all, if it were possible to do so, leaders in states could presumably do so, as well.

Our argument suggests numerous avenues for future research. Perhaps most importantly, our findings and theory could be further tested by applying our theory to other large power-small power relationships that comprise different combinations of external threat and hegemonic ambition. There are many situations in which a similar logic probably applies. There are numerous cases in which the small power may be more reluctant than the large power for a close relationship. In East Asia alone, Taiwan has been cautious about too close an embrace by the United States under Donald Trump, fearing that it could easily be left hanging by a distracted U.S. president. (The Economist 2016) The controversy over THAAD and South Korea is another example: The U.S. so clearly wanted the ROK to host its missile defense system that the U.S. offered to pay for the system all by itself. (Panda 2017) The controversy over who would pay for the missile defense system only exists because the U.S. has been so eager for South Korea to host the system. Exploring these and other cases in more detail would more clearly illuminate the complex causal dynamics at play in alliances – dynamics relatively under-explored in the current theoretical literature.

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## **Appendix I: Definition of High-Level Exchanges and Included Ministries/Departments**

“High-level exchange” is defined as an exchange between officials of at least two countries at the ministerial level or above. Though different countries have different numbers of ministries, notably, there are some common ministries in almost all states, including Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Education.

The following list includes all ministries and ministry-level agencies officially defined by the Vietnamese government.<sup>4</sup>

- Ministry of National Defense
- Ministry of Public Security
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Ministry of Justice
- Ministry of Finance
- Ministry of Transport
- Ministry of Construction
- Ministry of Education and Training
- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
- Ministry of Industry and Trade
- Ministry of Planning and Investment
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Science and Technology
- Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
- Ministry of Information and Communications
- Ministry of Home Affairs
- Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs
- Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism
- State Bank of Viet Nam
- Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Government Portal of Vietnam.  
<http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/English/ministries>

Apart from Head of state (including Premier and Vice Premier, President and Vice President), meeting with officials from equivalent departments in other political systems are coded as high-level exchanges.

In addition, given the role of the Communist Party the special political system in China, Vietnam, and Laos, we also include high-ranking officials from the following departments within the Central Committee of the Communist Party in these countries:

- Party General Secretary
- Member of Standing Committee of the Political Bureau
- Member of Commissions under the Central Committee, such as Central Military Commission, Central Commission for Discipline Inspection,<sup>5</sup> Commission for External Relations (International Department), etc.

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<sup>5</sup> This list is based on the organization chart of the Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party. Source: [http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/18th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress\\_Eng/t989630.htm](http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/18th_CPC_National_Congress_Eng/t989630.htm). These organizations are also shared by Vietnamese Communist Party, with minor differences.

## Appendix II: Coding Schemes of High-Level Exchange Data

### *Time Frame*

The main body of the paper focuses on the period from January 1, 2009 to June 30, 2016. This period is chosen for the following reason: the increased interest in Vietnam in general in recent literature is heavily driven by the increased attention on the South China Sea issue in the last few years. However, though the South China Sea is seen now, arguably, as the most dangerous destabilizing factor in the region, competing claims did not become white-hot until 2009, when China first included a map of the nine-dashed line in a *note verbale* to the CLCS.<sup>6</sup> Thus, a closer examination of texts from 2009 to date helps us focus and reveal the patterns and priorities of Vietnamese foreign and security policies in the context of rising tension regarding the South China Sea.

In robustness tests, we also analyzed data from January 2005 to December 2008 by using additional data from the National Defense White Papers of Vietnam. Published by Vietnam's Ministry of Defense, these white papers document the timing, purposes, and details of delegation of Vietnamese major exchanges with other countries. Including or not the data before 2009 doesn't change the pattern of high-level exchanges. Thus, for the purpose of clarity, we presented only the results post-2009 in the main-body text.

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<sup>6</sup> Limits in the Seas. No. 143. China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea. Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs. United States Department of State. Also, in 2011, China requested that another *Note Verbale* be communicated to UN Member States, which reiterated the first sentence excerpted above, and added that "China's sovereignty and related rights and jurisdiction in the South China Sea are supported by abundant historical and legal evidence." Source for the 2011 *Note Verable*: Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China, Note Verbale CML/8/2011, April 14, 2011, available from DOALOS at:

[http://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs\\_new/submissions\\_files/mysvnm33\\_09/chn\\_2011\\_re\\_phl\\_e.pdf](http://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mysvnm33_09/chn_2011_re_phl_e.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [This Note did not contain a dashed-line map.](#)

### *Data Source*

The major source for data collection is *Asia News Monitor*, a news group based in Bangkok, Thailand. This source is chosen based on two reasons: first, by searching the key words “Vietnam,” “high-level,” and “exchange” in ProQuest via USC, *Asia News Monitor* is the news source that covers such events most frequently, extensively and systematically. Second, this source was identified and recommended during authors’ field interviews with local experts and journalists.<sup>7</sup> All the exchanges are also cross-referenced with and supplemented by other Chinese and English sources, such as the “Activities of the Party and State” section in the online newspaper of Communist Party of Vietnam, the “Policies and Activities” section on the website of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the “Travel” section on the websites of the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Defense, section on “Bilateral Relations” on the websites of Vietnamese embassies in various countries, and news released by foreign countries’ embassies in Vietnam.

### *Search Procedure*

Specifically, we search “ft(vietnam high-level visit) AND pub(Asia News Monitor)” in ProQuest, which returns 1000 pieces of news articles from Asia News Monitor that contains the above key words. After human coding, 375 pieces of news articles are identified as codeable unduplicated events.

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<sup>7</sup> Authors were informed during our field interviews that Asia News Monitor as the best source to follow important political events in Vietnam for non-Vietnamese speakers. In addition, though Vietnamese government has been improving press freedom over the years, a lot of foreign journalists are still not allowed to report from residency, thus a lot of journalists that cover Vietnam are still based in Bangkok. Source: authors’ interview.

### *Descriptors of High-level Exchange*

We code the following information for each piece of news article:

- Year
- Month
- Date
- Country B
- Incoming or Outgoing Visit
- Locale
- Position of Vietnamese Official (Highest Ranking)
- Name of Vietnamese Official
- Position of Foreign Official (Highest Ranking)
- Name of Foreign Official
- Brief Remarks

### *Handling Tricky Cases*

*High-level Exchange in Third Country:* A tricky scenario is how to count bi-lateral meeting with country i during trips made for the purpose of attending a multilateral meeting in country j. For instance, in November 2014, Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang had bilateral meetings with US President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in Beijing, China. We coded these two meetings as high-level exchanges as they were arranged specifically during the multilateral meeting and have received extensive media coverage. However, as it is unclear who requested such bi-lateral meetings in these cases, the direction of the pursuit is then counted as “unknown”, thus the cases are being excluded from total counts when we further break the exchanges into incoming and outgoing visits.

*Leaders' Travel to Multi-lateral Meetings:* Relatedly, leaders' travel to a multi-lateral meetings or high-level meetings at a multi-lateral setting are also coded in the same method. Basically, unless a meeting between Vietnamese and foreign leaders is specifically singled out in the news article, leader's attendance of that multi-lateral conference is not coded, as there is no

specific dyadic country involved. For instance, the news article entitled “Vietnam: Let's get practical, PM tells ASEM” (2009) covers Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung at the ninth ASEM meeting in Hanoi, while only meetings with China, Cambodia and Singapore are singled out. Thus, only these meetings are coded. Another example is the news article entitled “Vietnam: PM Dung meets South Korean, Italian partners. G-20 in Seoul” (2010), in which only meetings with the PM of South Korea and Italy are mentioned, and are consequently coded. This method can address concerns such as countries visited Vietnam in certain year so many times as it is the chair of ASEAN.

### **Appendix III. Visits from Large Powers to its Allies versus to Small Power**

In addition to the two hypotheses that we tested in main-body text, the direction of high-level exchange can also help us examine the priorities of the large power in developing relations with countries in the region. Specifically, if the large power is pursuing the small power, would it view the small power more important than other regional countries, including its regional allies? For example, if we find the leaders of the U.S. show a higher incidence of visits to Vietnam than other regional countries including its allies, such allocation of scarce diplomatic resources indicates well the special importance bestowed by the U.S. on Vietnam. Similarly, if we find the small power pays more visits to the large power and its allies than to other small powers in the region, then we might conclude that the small power is the ardent suitor. Following this, we propose a third hypothesis:

*H3: If a small power is being pursued by a large power, then leaders of the large power will visit more frequently the small power, ceteris paribus, than other regional countries including its allies.*

To examine this hypothesis, we look at U.S. visits to the region from January 1, 2009 to June 30, 2016. The data is drawn from the U.S. State Department's Office of the Historian, which documents the travels of the U.S. President and Secretary of State. We then add all visits made by U.S. Defense Secretary based on information published by the U.S. Department of Defense. This gives us a total of 830 outgoing visits by U.S. President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense from January 2009 to June 2016.

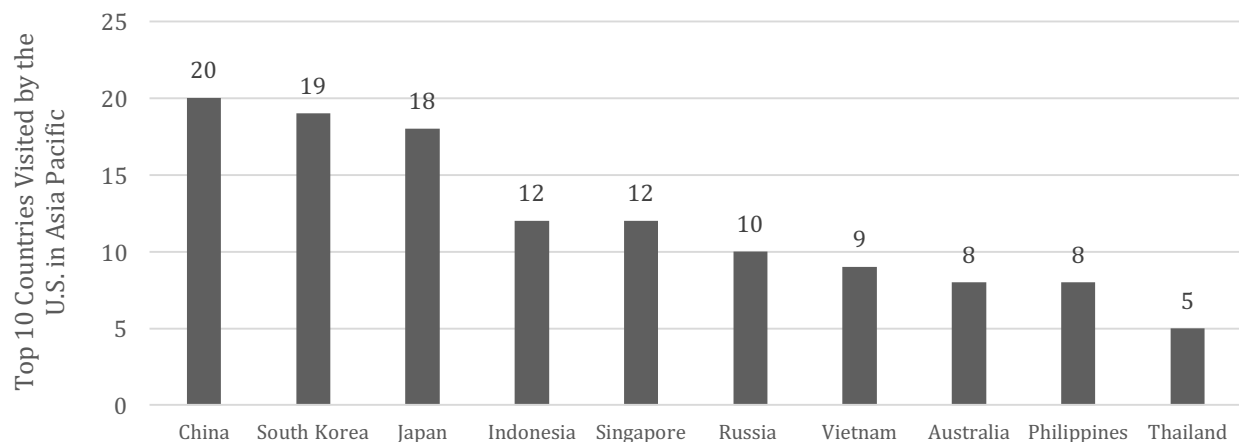
Figure A1 demonstrates the strategic priorities of the U.S. in the region. First, on a global scale, countries that are most frequently visited by the U.S. are still its NATO allies and key countries in Middle East, such as France, UK, Germany, Belgium, Israel, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Leaders of the U.S. and these countries frequently meet at bi-lateral and multi-lateral forums,

with an emphasis on deterring against two major threats: the continuing threat of terrorism, and the rising threat of Russian aggression. (US Department of Defense 2016) This demonstrates that despite the intensified speculation about the instability in the South China Sea, counter-terrorism and coalition with NATO has continued to be the top priority of national and defense leaders of the U.S.

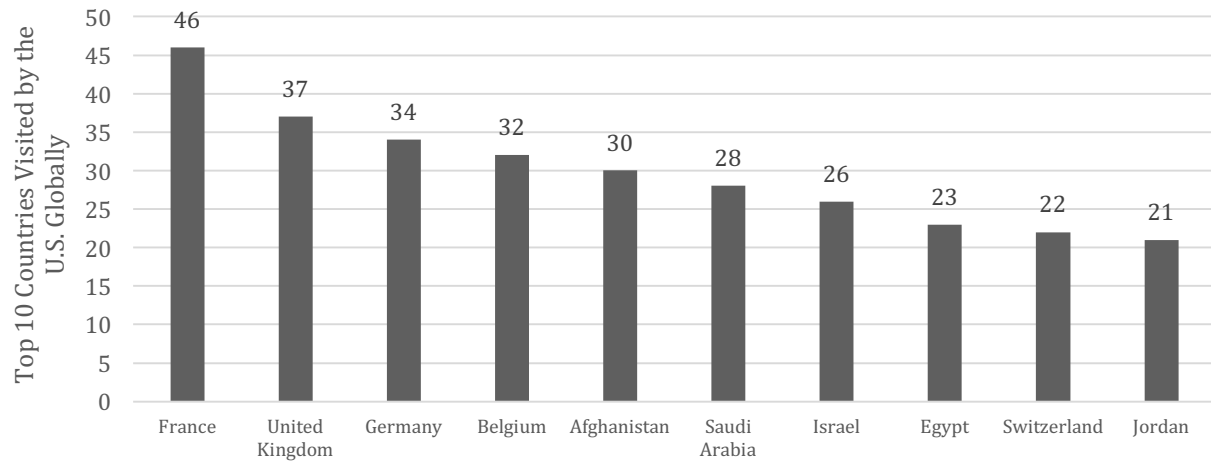
Second, within the region of East Asia, countries visited mostly by the U.S. are South Korea, China, and Japan, the most important stakeholders for the geopolitical balance on the Korean Peninsula, further signaling the strategic importance of Korean Peninsula to the U.S.

Third, within the region of Southeast Asia, the U.S. has paid more visits to Vietnam than to its regional allies, including Australia, Thailand and the Philippines. This observation is particularly important for testing hypothesis 3. The fact that the leaders of the U.S. show a higher incidence of visits to Vietnam even more than to its regional allies including Australia, Philippines, and Thailand signals the strategic importance of Vietnam to the U.S.

Figure A1: Outgoing High-level Visits from the U.S. (2009-2016)







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