

THE POLITICAL SITUATION OF THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION AND TRENDS IN MAKING FOREIGN POLICY OF SMALL AND MEDIUM COUNTRIES***Nguyen The Thanh**

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Abstract

In the early years of the 21st century, the global strategic focus has shifted from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, making this region the focal point in the foreign and security strategies of most great powers, as well as the strategic competition area between the superpowers - the US and China. To adapt to the fundamental changes in the world and regional situation, the US takes the lead in implementing foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region, and at the same time create a foundation to motivate global allies/partners to propose strategic visions and policy priorities to increase advantages and create competitive advantages with China in the region. Faced with the above situation, small and medium countries have adjusted their foreign policies more flexibly to protect their security, economic and development interests. Approaching from the perspective of realism theory, this article will focus on analyzing the political situation in the Indo-Pacific region in the region from 2017 to 2025, assessment of foreign policy choices of small and medium countries.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Foreign policy, Small and medium countries.

INTRODUCTION**The political situation of the Indo-Pacific region in the period 2017 – 2025**

The concept of “Indo-Pacific” first appeared in international political discourse in 2007, as a term referring to the geographical space including countries located on the shores of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific Ocean and the seas connecting these two important oceans. However, it was not until US President Donald Trump opened his speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in Da Nang, Vietnam in November 2017 by expressing his honor to be “present in Vietnam - the heart of the Indo-Pacific region” [Government Electronic Newspaper, 2017], and at the same time presented a vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region, where all prosperous countries stand side by side as independent and sovereign states. At that time, the concept “Indo-Pacific” brought about a change in perception from a strategic perspective and was mentioned a lot in diplomatic and academic documents around the world. The region has an increasingly important geostrategic position, including many sea routes connecting East - West, which are of strategic and vital significance to world trade; a dynamic development center, converging 6 over 10 of the world's largest economies [International Monetary Fund, 2021], including the US, China, Japan, India, Canada, South Korea with population of over 4 billion people, accounting for more than half of the world's population, and over 55% of global GDP [Minh Duc, 2022]; a place that holds many supply chains, production chains and advanced technologies. The Indo-Pacific region is witnessing fierce strategic competition between major countries, especially the US and China; where there are hotspots that pose great risks to peace, stability and development of the

region as well as the world, emerging issues such as Taiwan, North Korea, the East Sea, East China Sea, local conflicts between China - India, India - Pakistan, etc. The political situation in the Indo-Pacific region has 5 main characteristics:

First, the fundamental change in the correlation of major powers, promoting the “multipolar, dual-line” world and regional situation revolving around the axis of US/ally and Russia/China relations with many complex forms and structures, placing smaller countries in multi-layered international relations. The correlation and comparison of forces between major countries continue to change dramatically, in which the US continues to be the largest center of power, gathering the most hard and soft power factors, but the power gap between the US and other major countries is narrowing, especially China, causing the “unipolar” order to be eroded, with no “pole” dominating [Gideon Rachman, 2017]. The trend of division is becoming increasingly clear, especially with the appearance of signs of the formation and competition in blocs/alliances/groups of countries between the US/West/Allies and Russia/China based on three main factors of development model, system of initiatives and ideological issues [Vu Van Hien, 2023]. Through recent strategic frictions, it can be seen that division will be a long-term trend in strategic competition between great powers, thus promoting the thinking and policies of strategic autonomy of many small and medium countries, especially in economics and science and technology.

Second, the Indo-Pacific has become an area where competition between great powers is fierce, with the risk of instability and permanent conflicts/collisions of interests. This is the battlefield that determines the dominance of the US or China in the 21st century. The strategic competition between these two powers will continue to increase fiercely and comprehensively in many fields. The Indo-Pacific is gradually shaping a “dual superpowers and multi-powers” order with the US and China as the dual superpowers, and some other great

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power such as Japan, India, and Australia in the role of “multi-powers”, and the gathering of forces is taking place fiercely with the leading role of China and the US [Matthew P. Goodman, Scott Miller & Amy Searight, 2017]. The Chinese-led force gathering with the economy as the main driving force within the framework of the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) and many other strategies with global influence but mainly focusing on the Indo-Pacific such as the “Community of Common Destiny” (CCD), “Global Development Initiative” (GDI), “Global Security Initiative” (GSI), “Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank” (AIIB), etc. The Chinese force gathering in the region has strong support from Russia and a number of countries in and outside the region, including a number of ASEAN members. The US-led force is based on security as the main driving force, with the active participation of Japan, Australia, South Korea, New Zealand and some traditional allies/partners in ASEAN such as the Philippines and Singapore through the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” (FOIP), the “Quadilateral Security Dialogue” (QUAD) or the “Australia-UK-US Trilateral Enhanced Security Partnership” (AUKUS) and some cooperation initiatives focusing on the Indo-Pacific such as the “G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment” (PGII) and the “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity” (IPEF). In addition, other great powers promote power politics through internal interference, violating the territorial sovereignty of small and medium countries to achieve geopolitical interests, expand influence, promote the formation or aggravate hot spots in the region such as the East Sea, Myanmar, North Korea, etc.

Third, developments in Southeast Asia will determine the prospects for order in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, determining the positions of the US and China in the future. The decisive factor for the success or failure of BRI and IPS lies in this region. China considers Southeast Asia a strategic buffer zone, a living space, a starting point for BRI, which is vital to the goal of completing the second 100-year goal, making China the world's number 1 superpower [Dinh Cong Tuan, 2022]; The US also takes Southeast Asia as a strategic focus in IPS to counter China's BRI. The two strategic focuses in Southeast Asia are the East Sea and the Mekong Sub-region. Both the US and China have the basis and foundation to consolidate their presence and influence through a network of allies/partners, economic cooperation, trade, defense, and security activities. ASEAN has gradually promoted its positive role, but is facing the risk of polarization due to the influence and attraction of major countries, challenging its role as a bridge and balancer in resolving security and development issues in the region.

Fourth, the Indo-Pacific region has become the growth center of the world economy, driven by scientific and technological achievements and regional integration/cooperation trends. Due to directly benefiting from the international investment shift trend after the Covid-19 pandemic and the fourth industrial revolution, the Indo-Pacific leads the world in economic growth, contributing more than 50% of annual global growth, concentrated in the group of emerging and developing countries in this region. Economic and trade integration continue to be the dominant trend, strongly promoted, creating a foundation for the development of the Indo-Pacific [Nguyen Van Duong, 2024]. ASEAN continues to assert itself as an important entity, keeps being enlisted and influenced by major

countries, and has the ability to promote its central role, connecting economies in the emerging regional structure.

Finally, traditional and non-traditional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region are increasingly larger and more diverse. The Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, the Myanmar issue and especially the East Sea are still the hottest spots in the region, and the possibility of armed conflict cannot be ruled out. Non-traditional security issues that emerge are epidemics, climate change and food security, water resources, and cyber security, in which Asia, especially Southeast Asia, is facing serious challenges from non-traditional security, mainly challenges from climate change [Tran Thi Ha, 2017, p.68]. The consequences of the above challenges are very serious, especially for small and medium countries with low response capacity. National capacity in science and technology will be a decisive factor in the existence and status of a country in the coming time.

Trends in making foreign policy of small and medium countries in the Indo-Pacific region

The current political situation in the Indo-Pacific poses intertwined advantages, difficulties and challenges for small and medium countries in the region, requiring these countries to adopt proper foreign policies to maximize national interests, ensure sovereignty, territorial integrity and maintain independence and autonomy, in which the following trends emerge:

Trend of diversifying foreign relations

In response to the complex geopolitical situation, many small and medium countries in the region have chosen to diversify their foreign relations and seek strategic partners. This is to minimize the risk of over-dependence on a single power, increase bargaining power, and facilitate the maintenance of autonomy in foreign policy decisions. The motivation for this trend mainly comes from four key interests: First, to ensure sovereignty and territorial integrity: Countries in the region are concerned that dependence on a single power will lead to an imbalance of power, making them vulnerable to imposition on territorial sovereignty issues. Second, to increase autonomy in foreign policy decisions: Small and medium countries can maintain a more neutral stance in power conflicts, avoiding being forced to choose sides. Third, to enhance international status: Through diversifying relations, small and medium countries can play a more active role in international and regional forums, enhancing their voice and influence. Finally, to protect economic interests: In the context of globalization, maintaining relations with many economic partners helps these countries maximize trade and investment benefits, while minimizing risks from economic shocks.

In terms of politics and strategy, small and medium countries cooperate/support and receive cooperation strategies and programs in many important fields from great powers to maximize national interests, mobilize external resources, and ensure national security; lots of multilateral mechanisms and initiatives initiated by major countries have initially received support in the Indo-Pacific region such as BRI, China's “Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership” (RCEP), the US IPEF, Japan's FOIP, etc. At the bilateral level, small and medium countries implement a proactive and pragmatic foreign policy, including promoting cooperation and

strengthening relations with many major powers, accepting to reconcile/temporarily put aside conflicts and differences to promote common interests. In terms of economics, small and medium countries tend to seek opportunities for trade and investment cooperation from great powers to take advantage of resources to promote economic development, acquire modern technology transfer and enhance national competitiveness, through the following measures: Promoting negotiations and signing investment and trade agreements; perfecting domestic mechanisms, policies and infrastructure systems to build a favorable and transparent business environment for foreign investors; participating in international supply chains and regional infrastructure projects initiated by major countries.

In terms of defense and security, small and medium countries proactively build and strengthen cooperative relations with major countries to ensure national security, enhance defense potential and affirm their role in a number of international and regional security mechanisms, through the following measures: Building bilateral, multilateral, and sub-multilateral defense alliances and signing cooperation agreements with major countries, allies/partners; actively participating in multilateral security mechanisms, contributing to maintaining peace and stability in the region and internationally; enhancing defense potential, modernizing armed forces, focusing on purchasing advanced weapons and military equipment and developing domestic defense technology; expanding international cooperation in deploying military exercises and counter-terrorism activities to enhance coordination capacity and respond to common security threats and challenges. Through promoting comprehensive cooperation with major countries, small and medium countries have the opportunity and favorable conditions to promote sustainable development, enhance international status and national comprehensive strength, but face many significant risks and challenges such as: First, as tensions between major powers continue to rise, maintaining a balanced relationship with many partners can lead to conflicts of interests, thus requiring countries to be skillful and flexible in diplomacy. Second, small and medium countries may face pressure, be influenced, pressured, and even interfered in their internal affairs, policy orientations, and specific foreign affairs activities. Third, the diversification of foreign relations can lead to changes in the internal power structure of countries, causing political or social instability.

Trend of strengthening regional cooperation and participating in international, multilateral and sub-multilateral mechanisms

The trend of strengthening regional cooperation and participating in international organizations has become one of the strategic pillars in the foreign policies of small and medium countries in the Indo-Pacific region since 2017. While the regional security environment is becoming more complex and tense due to competition between great powers, countries have chosen to strengthen regional cooperation and actively participate in international organizations to build a collective defense system, contributing to minimizing risks to national interests and security and consolidating international position, ensuring the ability to respond to common challenges and non-traditional security such as epidemics, climate change, terrorism, etc. Since the end of the 20th century, many regional cooperation mechanisms have been established and have affirmed their position and role in the global political situation such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),

the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). In addition, major countries, mainly the US and China, actively deploy many sub-multilateral mechanisms such as the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (including Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam), the “QUAD” group or “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” (including the US, India, Japan and Australia), AUKUS and most recently the trilateral security dialogue cooperation between the US, Japan and the Philippines (JAPHUS, 2023) and many others to attract the participation of small and medium countries.

Small and medium countries build regional cooperation forums through signing agreements/treaties, forming a common framework of activities/behaviors, focusing on key sectors such as politics - diplomacy, defense - security, economy - trade, culture - society, and people-to-people exchange. Through these mechanisms, small and medium countries have the opportunity to take advantage of resources to serve the goal of sustainable development and solve a number of regional and international challenges such as climate change and transnational crime. However, due to the lack of binding and differences in interests and policy priorities among member countries, regional cooperation forums find it difficult to maintain internal consensus and solidarity, especially in cases of disputes and conflicts between countries in the region or when they are interfered with or dominated by great powers.

Trend of balancing development interests and ensuring national security

The Indo-Pacific region is currently the focus of strategic competition between great powers, especially the US and China; small and medium countries are not only targets for attracting and gathering forces to restrain the opponent, but also areas for competing for influence by great powers. Moves to increase presence and involvement in regional hot spots and promote economic cooperation and infrastructure connectivity at bilateral and multilateral levels by some major powers such as the US, China, Japan, South Korea, etc. are forcing small and medium countries to face the situation of “having to choose sides”, being dependent on foreign countries, and more seriously, falling into the “debt trap”, losing control of resources, and being influenced by domestic and foreign policies and guidelines. In face of the above situation, small and medium countries have been implementing many balancing measures and plans to ensure strategic initiative in all situations including:

First, maintaining a balanced, objective stance, complying with international laws, avoiding being “stuck” and falling into a “side-choosing” situation is the priority of small and medium countries in expressing their views and responding to international and regional hot spots. A typical example is the approach of Southeast Asian countries towards the Russia - Ukraine conflict; despite the lobbying efforts of relevant parties to take drastic and tough actions against Russia, ASEAN persists in its neutral stance, calling on all parties and the international community to make maximum efforts to end and not aggravate the fighting, and make maximum efforts to end and not escalate the conflict [Van Do, Phung Kien, 2022]. This policy helps to “maintain the bridge” in relations, maximize national interests in cooperation with all parties and

is consistent with the “non-alignment” policy pursued by Southeast Asian countries.

Second, proactively deploy many measures and policies to respond to the risk of “debt trap”, economic dependence in investment and trade cooperation, and infrastructure connection with major powers [Lai Thai Binh, 2023]. Besides, instead of depending on a single economic partner, small and medium countries have expanded relations with many other countries, including great powers and countries with developed economies such as Japan, South Korea, India, EU, etc. and actively participate in regional organizations such as ASEAN, APEC and other free trade agreements to ensure a broader cooperative environment, thereby helping to reduce risks from economic dependence on one country but also creating counterbalances in economic and diplomatic relations with major countries.

Lastly, strengthen military potential and promote defense cooperation to ensure self-defense capabilities in case of conflict or security threats. Compared to other regions in the world, the Indo-Pacific has many important maritime routes passing through the world and many sovereignty disputes exist, therefore maritime security is the top priority of small and medium countries to protect interests and security at sea, including maritime routes, resources and sovereignty over seas and islands. The main actions include: Strengthening military potential and improving the capacity to patrol and monitor sea areas, promptly preventing external encroachments; participating in international cooperation mechanisms on maritime security to ensure freedom of navigation and resolve common issues, including compliance with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), considering this an important legal framework for managing and resolving issues related to maritime rights [Le Duc Hanh, 2022]; investing in developing marine infrastructure to help improve the capacity to manage and protect the sea; expanding defense cooperation, coordinating with allies/partners to deploy a number of drills and emergency response activities to both improve military capacity and “deterrence”, affirming the determination to protect sovereignty.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of many fluctuations in the world, increasing complex tensions in many regions, The current political situation in the Indo-Pacific opens up many opportunities for development cooperation, but it also negatively affects small and medium countries in the region, especially the pressure to choose sides in the strategic competition between large countries, requiring countries to have appropriate foreign policies to adapt, in which three trends have emerged: Diversifying foreign relations; strengthening regional cooperation and participate in international, multilateral and sub-multilateral mechanisms; balancing development interests and ensure national security.

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