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**Master's Thesis**

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**Navigating Ambiguities: Unravelling Russia's Hedging  
Strategy in the South China Sea**

Master's Thesis

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## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on April 29, 2024

Alexandre Laurent Adelinet

## **References**

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## **Abstract**

Russia's approach to the South China Sea has been ambiguous, causing certain scholars to classify it as 'strategic hedging' against China. This research explores the research question, "How do Russia's endeavours with Vietnam in the South China Sea constitute 'strategic hedging' towards China?". To be able to identify strategic hedging in a behaviour, the research builds a 'strategic hedging identification mechanism' made of three levels and five criteria. Using the mechanism, the research successfully identifies Russia's behaviour in the China South Sea as strategic hedging, with Vietnam being the hedge. Russia is soft balancing against China through military and energy endeavours with Vietnam, whilst simultaneously soft aligning Beijing. The research identifies the conditional factors explaining Moscow's strategic hedging as China's Central Asia and Arctic policy, and Russia's increasing dependence on China since 2014. The research concludes that Russia's strategic hedging in the South China Sea is likely to continue in the future, as damage control to minimise political vassalization, but could end and switch to bandwagoning depending on Russia's power deconcentration trend.

## **Keywords**

Russia, China, Vietnam, South China Sea, strategic hedging.

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## Introduction

The South China Sea and its Paracel and Spratly islands have been a geopolitical powder keg in South East Asia over the past fifty years, and the weight it carries can hardly be understated. At the heart of the dispute are six claimants, Brunei, China (PRC), Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam, whose maritime claims over the sea and its islands overlap. Beijing, behind its infamous ‘nine dash line’, lay claim to the near entirety of the sea, asserting that “China’s sovereignty over Nanhai Zhudao [Parcel and Spratly islands] is established in the course of history”.<sup>1</sup> Backing its claims through similar historical claims, Vietnam also lays claim to the Paracel and Spratly islands based on previous possession during colonial French Indochina.<sup>2</sup> To understand why the South China Sea is coveted as such by so many different parties, it is helpful to consider both its geography and its resources.

The South China Sea represents one of the most important maritime routes, seeing over 20% of the world’s yearly trade sailing through its water and enabling access to the Malacca strait.<sup>3</sup> The sea is also a rich ground for fishing, which is an important source of livelihood for many of its coastal populations, and also possesses non-negligible reserves of hydrocarbons in its seabed.<sup>4</sup> The conflict had remained of relatively low intensity throughout the years, but since 2012 saw an important increase in tension and has now reached a critical all-time high. To assert its claims of the territory comprising its ‘nine dash line’, Beijing has been actively pursuing the development of artificial islands and their intense militarization,

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<sup>1</sup> State Council of the People's Republic of China, “China Adheres to the Position of Settling Through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea”, July 13, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Hong Thao Nguyen, “Vietnam’s South China Sea Policy,” in *Routledge Handbook of the South China Sea* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2021), 227-228.

<sup>3</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?”, January 25, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Leszek Buszynski, “The South China Sea: Oil, Maritime Claims, and U.S.–China Strategic Rivalry.” *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2012): 139.



coupled with an increasingly aggressive coast guard that deny access to the sea during their patrols.<sup>5</sup> Well aware of the strategic importance of the South China Sea, the US has been deeply involved in the dispute, enhancing its military partnership with the Philippines and conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), aimed at balancing Beijing's expansionist ambitions in the sea.<sup>6</sup>

It is relevant, in this context, to ponder on Russia's role or approach in this dispute with global implications. Russia has been known for its deep involvement in international affairs, and this particular dispute involves China and Vietnam, two countries with which Moscow has maintained strong relationships.<sup>7</sup> Russia's approach to the dispute has been the subject of some research, albeit limited in volume and scope. The existing scholarship did, however, lay the foundation for further research by outlining what appears to be a strategic hedging behaviour from Russia towards China, with Vietnam as its hedge. This research seeks to delve further into the subject by exploring and answering the following research question: "How do Russia's endeavours with Vietnam in the South China Sea constitute 'strategic hedging' towards China?". To that end, a mechanism to identify strategic hedging behaviour will first be developed, building on the existing scholarship. With that mechanism in hand, the research will then delineate Russia's behaviour in the region, and consecutively run it through the developed mechanism. Depending on whether or not strategic hedging is successfully identified or rejected, a discussion will then be possible to answer the research question and the result's implications, and ultimately draw a conclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "China's 'Militarisation' in the South China Sea: Three Target Audiences." *East Asian Policy* 8, no. 2 (April 2016): 18.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Lundquist, "FONOPS in the South China Sea: Nation Counter China's Excessive and Illegitimate Maritime Claims." *Military Technology* 45, no. 5 (May 2021): 65.

<sup>7</sup> Anton Tsvetov, "7. Vietnam–Russia Relations: Glorious Past, Uncertain Future" In *Vietnam's Foreign Policy under Doi Moi* edited by Le Hong Hiep and Anton Tsvetov, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2018: 160.

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1 Russia's foreign policy and approach to the South China Sea

The current scholarship regarding Russia's approach to the South China Sea has been limited, and often contradictory. A repeated theme in Putin's discourse, Russia has sought under his leadership a shift from the unipolar world that emerged under the US hegemony after the Cold War, to a multipolar world order by balancing against the American unipole.<sup>8</sup> Experts have associated this aspiration for a multipolar system to the willingness to engage with China, including in the South China Sea, to balance the US powerful predominance.<sup>9</sup> Russia's "pivot to the East" announced during Putin's presidential campaign in 2012, have further led both international and Russian scholarship to comment on the necessity for Russia to get involved in the South China Sea regional conflict if it was to succeed as a credible Pacific and Eurasian power.<sup>10</sup> Experts have however recognized the complexity of Russia's approach in the South China Sea, most preeminently characterised by its strategic partnership with China and simultaneous relations with its rival, Vietnam, being the biggest supplier of arms of the latter and exploiting hydrocarbons on its account in shelves also claimed by China.<sup>11</sup> This seemingly paradoxical foreign policy explains the different and contradicting explanations that have been set forth by scholars. In their work, Dikarev and Lukin oppose a strategic thinking on Russia's part in the South China Sea and argue instead that it is profit-driven, with the sole aim of generating revenues through arms deals and exploiting

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<sup>8</sup> Elena Chebankova, "Multipolarity in Russia: A philosophical and practical understanding", in *National perspectives on a multipolar order: Interrogating the global power transition*, ed. Benjamin Zala (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 94.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Blank, "Russia and Vietnam Team Up to Balance China", *The National Interest*, April 7, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Blank, "Paradoxes Abounding Russia and the South China Sea Issue", in *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, ed. Anders Corr (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2022), 111; Alexander Vladimirovich Frolov, "Južno-kitajskoe more: zona razdora ili sotrudničestva? [South China Sea: zone of discord or cooperation?]", *Puti k miru i bezopasnosti* 45, no.2 (November, 2013):139.

<sup>11</sup> Blank, 111; Alexander Korolev, "Russia in the South China Sea: Balancing and Hedging", *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15, no. 2 (April, 2019): 264.

hydrocarbons on Vietnam's account.<sup>12</sup> Whilst the arms trade with Vietnam is indeed lucrative, it pales in comparison to the much larger Russian arms sales to China, its second largest arms purchaser, and therefore cannot sufficiently explain risking a worsening of relations and a decrease in sales with China by arming its rival.<sup>13</sup> Further omitted by Dikarev and Lukin is the high cost of exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons at sea, further exacerbated by Russian oil and gas companies' higher than average operating costs, making it a hardly profitable venture.<sup>14</sup>

Baev and Tønnesson make the valuable contribution of interpreting Russia's approach to the South China Sea at a systemic level, in the light of Russia's increasing dependence on China that began with the heavy sanctions from the US and Europe following the annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>15</sup> As such, Vietnam is identified as a political instrument for Russia; a rival to China that can be courted to affirm political independence and leverage. This is helpful in bringing Russia's SCS foreign policy in its context at the systemic level and out of a reductionist focus on regional causes, but it is still lacking depth in identifying the forms and strategic thinking the policy takes, i.e. strategic hedging.

Strategic hedging is identified in Russia's South China Sea foreign policy in the work of Blank and Korolev. For Blank, Russia's hedging behaviour is due to a willingness to balance the US through its partnership with China, but to also balance China with Vietnam to assert political independence.<sup>16</sup> In Korolev's work, Russia's approach is divided into two at systematic and regional level. Like Blank, Korolev argues that Russia partners with China in

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<sup>12</sup>Andrey Dikarev and Alexander Lukin, "Russia's Approach to South China Sea Territorial Dispute: It's Only Business, Nothing Personal", *The Pacific Review* 35, no. 4 (January, 2021): 640.

<sup>13</sup> Justine Gadon, Pieter D. Wezeman and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2022", *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, March 2023, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Pavel K. Baev and Stein Tønnesson, "Can Russia keep its special ties with Vietnam while moving closer and closer to China?", *International Area Studies Review* 18, no.3 (August, 2015): 320.

<sup>15</sup> Baev and Tønnesson, 317.

<sup>16</sup> Blank.

the South China Sea to balance against the US at a systematic level, but only hedges at a regional level against China with Vietnam because of lone regional causes.<sup>17</sup> This separation into systematic and regional level causes and effects have the detrimental effect of reducing the analysis to a partial, incomplete picture in which parts of the explanations are only sought in their immediate and apparent surroundings.

Thus, the body of work related to Russia's approach to the dispute is not homogeneous, but does set forth some of the key elements for a more in-depth analysis of its hedging behaviour, and its causes at a systemic level and the forms taken. The research aims to contribute to the existing literature through a comprehensive analysis of Russia's behaviour in the South China Sea, and exploring its causes and implications at a systemic level.

## **1.2 Strategic Hedging**

Hedging has garnered notable attention as a concept in the post-cold war international relations field, particularly within the neorealist and neoclassical realist dogmas from which it originates. Although benefitting from a growth of interest over the recent years in the international relations scholarship, the strategic hedging as a concept remains relatively novel and not well defined, particularly when compared to older and better established concepts like balancing and bandwagoning. In her influential article, Goh offered a definition of hedging as "a set of strategies aimed at avoiding a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning or neutrality. Instead, they cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another".<sup>18</sup> This definition rightly describes hedging as a middle position, positioned between balancing and bandwagoning, but unreasonably limits hedging as indecisive behaviour, not strategic thinking that could be pursued on its own purposefully

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<sup>17</sup> Korolev, 263.

<sup>18</sup> Evelyn Goh, "Understanding "hedging" in Asia-Pacific security", *Pacific Forum CSIS*, August 31, 2006, 1.

by a state towards another. Goh also limits hedging as a small state strategy, considering that major powers are more inclined to strategise in zero-sum terms.<sup>19</sup>

Tessman builds upon Goh's concept of hedging, as the middle ground made of simultaneous engagement and balancing. Rather than a small state practice, Tessman considers "*strategic hedging*" as a way to conceptualize much of the strategic behavior currently employed by second-tier states like China, Russia, Brazil, and France".<sup>20</sup> In a unipolar system dominated by a hegemon, hedging can serve middle powers to balance against the unipole whilst avoiding direct military confrontation through simultaneous engagement.<sup>21</sup> Tessman further identified a three criteria mechanism aimed at determining hedging behaviour in foreign policies.<sup>22</sup> The first criterion distinguishes two types of strategic hedging; either improving the ability for potential military conflict against the system leader (type A), or improving the ability to endure severance of goods or subsidies provided by the system leader (type B). The second criterion is the avoidance of direct confrontation by forming military alliance against the system leader (external balancing) and intensive military buildup (internal balancing). The third criterion is the behaviour being strategic, steered at the highest levels of government and acknowledged as an important matter to the state. In Tessman's older work with Wolfe, a fourth criteria has been presented, regarding the observable cost of the hedging strategy, such as economic repercussions for the hedging state.<sup>23</sup> These are useful criteria to identify hedging behaviour in foreign policies, but it does restrict hedging as targeting the system's unipole and could benefit from changes and adjustments to certain criteria. Tunsjø, in his work, applies the concept of hedging in a similar

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<sup>19</sup> Goh, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Brock F. Tessman, "System Structure and State Strategy: Adding Hedging to the Menu", *Security Studies* 21, no.2 (May, 2012): 192.

<sup>21</sup> Tessman, 192.

<sup>22</sup> Tessman, 195.

<sup>23</sup> Brock Tessman and Wojtek Wolfe, "Great Powers and Strategic Hedging: The Case of Chinese Energy Security Strategy", *International Studies Review* 13, no.2 (June, 2011): 221.

fashion to post-Cold War Sino-American relations. The US and China, Tunsjø argues, hedge against one another “in order to manage uncertainty about the sustainability of the unipolar system, China’s rise, and the potential transition to a new bipolar or multipolar system”.<sup>24</sup> In a neorealist approach, Tunsjø links hedging to risk management and security seeking in the uncertain anarchic world system.<sup>25</sup>

The overall neorealist scholarship on strategic hedging agrees upon certain defining elements and disagrees upon others. Hedging is overall understood to be a middle position, a strategy of cultivating relations with a party whilst also balancing against it. Disagreements amongst scholars still persist on the purpose and nature of hedging, perceived as indecisive diplomacy by small or medium states or on the contrary as a strategic behaviour employed by small, middle and major powers alike. The three criterion identification mechanism set forth by Tessman offers a constructive approach to analyse foreign policies for hedging behaviours and will be utilised as a basis from which to build the thesis methodology.<sup>26</sup>

## **2. Neorealist theoretical framework**

Whilst the definition of strategic hedging varies and is yet to be set in stone, as determined in the prior literature review, the concept originates and stays anchored in the neorealist theory of international relations. Liberal and constructivist scholars on their side have been reluctant, if not antagonistic, towards the concept, arguing instead that “peaceful change in international relations can be socially constructed through long habits of dialogues and cooperation between countries”.<sup>27</sup> A neorealist framework will thus be adopted to

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<sup>24</sup> Øystein Tunsjø, “U.S.-China Relations: From Unipolar Hedging toward Bipolar Balancing”, in *Strategic Adjustment and the Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia*, ed. Robert S. Ross (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 41.

<sup>25</sup> Tunsjø, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Tessman, 210.

<sup>27</sup> Dewi Fortuna Anwar, “Indonesia’s Hedging plus Policy in the Face of China’s Rise and the US-China Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region.” *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 2 (2023): 371.

conceptualise the Sino-Russian relationship and its dynamics for this research. The balance of power theory and polarity, core assumptions of realist thoughts, brought on the two senior concepts of “balancing” and “bandwagoning”, with “buck passing” being at times included. States, the system’s unit and forefront actors, exist in an anarchic system and as such hold security as their primordial concern for survival. When a state in the system develops into a hegemon, other actors have historically chosen to balance against it and/or ally amongst themselves to keep a balance of power, or on the contrary to bandwagon with the emerging hegemon for the prospects of significant return gains. The end of the bipolar system brought by the dissolution of the USSR into fifteen independent states in 1991 saw the emergence of the new, post-Cold War, unipolar system under US hegemony. The new system polarity revolutionised international relations, in a similar fashion that the conclusion of WWII in 1945 had done, and made balancing and bandwagoning insufficient to explain new emerging patterns of behaviour by themselves.<sup>28</sup> The American unipole has not been left undisturbed however, and systemic polarity has been greatly impacted by a power deconcentration trend stemming from the rise of China and Russia’s recovery from its turbulent 90s, further accentuated by those countries’ aspirations to return to a balance of power and a multipolar world order.

Strategic hedging comes in this context, as a middle position and dual approach composed of both balancing and alignment, enabling a more thoughtful approach to analyse state’s behaviour and strategic choices in the current unipolar system and its power deconcentration trend.<sup>29</sup> Actors may face a strongly growing state near them and consider alternative strategies than bandwagoning or balancing against its growing influence, wanting to minimise uncertainties its rise causes but also whilst avoiding turning it into an open

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<sup>28</sup> Tunsjø, 42-43.

<sup>29</sup> Hanna Samir Kassab, “Nationalism and Globalization in Multipolarity.” In *Globalization, Multipolarity and Great Power Competition*, May 19, 2022: 30.

enemy to potentially reap some of the profits that are to be made. This has particularly been the case with China in South East Asia, which explains why the concept of strategic hedging has so heavily orbited around the region in the literature thus far.<sup>30</sup> Theorising on hedging in a neorealist framework, Tessman identifies current polarity and concentration trend as the main components driving a state to adopt a strategic choice like balancing or bandwagoning. From there, strategic choices may be further influenced by conditional factors, leading instead the state to adopt an alternative strategy, such as strategic hedging.<sup>31</sup> As set forth by Tessman, “strategic choices will be influenced considerably by conditioning factors that are not directly related to polarity or power concentration: geography, ideology, nuclear weapons, state capacity, and the rise of threatening powers may pull a second-tier state away from the relevant core strategy and push it toward a different option that fits its particular circumstances”.<sup>32</sup> The system polarity, including its power concentration trend, is as such the independent variable of the analysis and strategic choices, ergo, the dependent variables. This structural theory will be utilised, although an adjustment must be made regarding conditions as not a single factor but often several, combined factors, bringing about the conditions leading to an alternative strategic choice like hedging. Strategy #1 would therefore not originate from the lone factor A, but rather derive from conditional factors A, B, C. If Russia’s behaviour in the South China Sea can indeed be considered a case of strategic hedging targeted at China as this thesis seeks to explore, this adapted structural theory from Tessman is suitable, if changed, to understand why this strategic choice has been made by Russia. This would be done by looking at the system’s polarity, its power concentration trend and determining conditional factors.

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<sup>30</sup> Goh, 1.

<sup>31</sup> See appendix no. 1 in the appendix for Tessman’s structural theory.

<sup>32</sup> Tessman, 195.



The current polarity remains tipped at the US unipole, although power concentration has unarguably fluctuated, as most relevantly illustrated by Australia's 2023 Defence Strategic Review, stating that "no longer is our Alliance partner, the United States, the unipolar leader of the Indo-Pacific".<sup>33</sup> Power deconcentration away from the US has been attributed to a certain extent to Russia's economic bloom occurring in the 2000s, but also most importantly to the rise of China, following its own rapid growth since the anchoring of its economic reforms in 1992 and becoming the world's second economy behind that of the US.<sup>34</sup> China's power concentration has been accentuated by Xi Jinping's military reform in 2015, and the intense buildup of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) thenceforth.<sup>35</sup> Both Russia and China have been vocal about wanting a multipolar world, an aspiration that has brought them out of their historical differences since the 2000s and led to a strategic partnership aimed at balancing against the American unipole. However, the tremendous and far greater power concentration by China has also meant that the dynamics of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership go beyond simple alignment, as security uncertainties inevitably bring about concerns and might give way to a different approach than straight bandwagoning and alignment. The polarity and power trend in the current system having been established, conditional factors could subsequently be analysed to understand the choice of strategic hedging, provided that Russia is found to be hedging against China in the South China Sea by the methodology that will be set forth in the following section.

### **3. Methodology**

In order to identify as thoroughly and with as much conclusiveness as possible, this research methodology will rely on developing an hedging identification mechanism, building

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<sup>33</sup> Australian Government, Defence Strategic Review, 2023, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Kassab, 31.

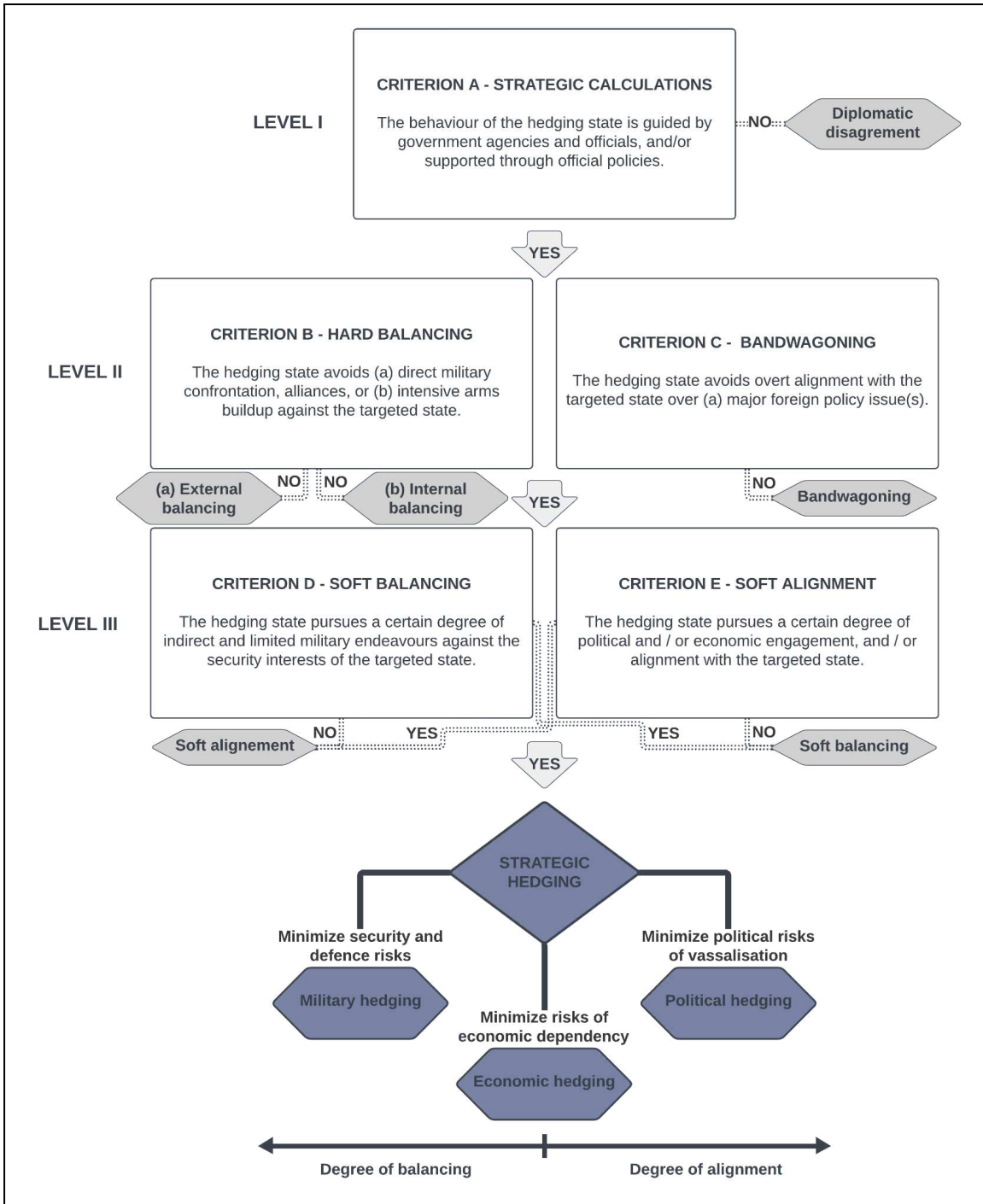
<sup>35</sup> Andrei A. Kokoshin, "2015 Military Reform in the People's Republic of China", Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, October, 2016: 2.

and enhancing upon Tessman's and Kuik's work. In Tessman's original mechanism, three criteria / filters are introduced to determine whether or not a behaviour can be attributed as strategic hedging.<sup>36</sup> As discussed in the literature review, the first criterion requires the behaviour to improve the ability of the state to either cope with a military conflict against its target, or from the loss of financial gains it provides. The second criterion requires the state to not pursue hard balancing, neither domestic nor external, and the third and final criterion requires that the behaviour is guided and planned by the government and its agencies. In Kuik's work, strategic hedging is refined into different kinds of hedging, based upon the degree of power rejection and power acceptance of the hedging state toward the targeted actor. Strategic hedging that is primarily aimed at minimising security risks is considered "military hedging", whilst hedging that is primarily aimed at minimising political subservience is identified as "political hedging".<sup>37</sup> The methodology of this research makes use of the work mentioned by modifying and enhancing it to bring about changes deemed necessary for a more thorough identification of strategic hedging. Three levels, made up of five criteria, constitute an appropriate and updated strategic hedging identification mechanism.

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<sup>36</sup> See appendix no. 2 in the appendix for Tessman's "Mechanism for Identifying Strategic Hedging Behavior".

<sup>37</sup> Kuik, Cheng-Chwee. '(With Gilbert Rozman) "Introduction to 'Light or Heavy Hedging: Positioning between China and the United States"' In *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies 2015*, Vol. 26 (Washington, DC: Korea Economic Institute of America), 2015, 3.



**Figure 1.** Strategic Hedging Identification Mechanism

The first level, made up of a single criterion, is taken from Tessman’s third criterion. The criterion requires the state’s behaviour to be “guided by government agencies and officials, and/or supported through official policies”, ensuring that ordinary diplomatic disputes that are not strategic choices and do occur in international relations are eliminated. If the studied behaviour is indeed piloted by the government, it can be considered strategic and

can therefore move on to the second level of criteria. This first level (I) and criterion (A), taken from Tessman, was set to be the first in the mechanism as it seems necessary to eliminate in the first place the possibility of diplomatic dispute without broader strategic implications, before moving on to analysing the behaviour for hard balancing as is not the case in Tessman's work.

The second level (II), like the third, is made up of a pair of criteria (B & C) that the analysed behaviour has to pass in order to move to the next and final level. The left criterion B eliminates hard balancing behaviour by requiring the actor to avoid direct military confrontation and alliances against its target (external balancing), and to also avoid intensive arms buildup aimed at it (internal balancing). This criterion again is taken from Tessman second criterion, and is necessary to ensure that the studied behaviour is not direct balancing against its target, as strategic hedging is a middle position and is therefore on neither end of the balancing to bandwagoning spectrum, but in between, made of both. All remaining three criteria are original and not found in Tessman's work, having been added in this mechanism as deemed necessary to determine more comprehensively strategic hedging in states' behaviours. The first criterion of Tessman, about the increased ability of the hedging state to cope militarily or economically against its target was not kept as considered reductionist, limiting the purposes of hedging to narrow objectives. Using Kuik's work, hedging in the mechanism developed here considers that its objectives can be varied and possibly categorised based upon its level of balancing and alignment, allowing for a more nuanced approach to identifying hedging and its origins. Criterion C of level II seeks to discard the opposite side of the spectrum, bandwagoning. It requires that the actor avoid overt alignment with its targeted state, although alignment to a certain degree is not to be eliminated, on the contrary. This criterion rather seeks to eliminate bandwagoning behaviour that would be

characterised by total alignment of foreign policies, and could therefore poorly be attributable to strategic hedging.

The third and final level (III) contains the last pair of criteria (D & E) of the mechanism, before the analysed behaviour can be identified as hedging. Criterion D requires that the actor pursues a certain degree of balancing against its target, be it subtle or moderate, internal or external. In a similar fashion, fifth criterion E requires the actor to pursue a certain degree of alignment with its target, once again be it slight or moderate. By then, if the examined behaviour has successfully validated the three levels and their five criteria, the mechanism ergo assert that the behaviour corresponds to strategic hedging. The behaviour cannot be reduced as ordinary diplomatic friction, nor does it correspond to hard balancing or bandwagoning. Instead, the behaviour represents a dual approach, contradicting, pursuing both a certain degree of balancing and engagement at once; and as such can be determined as strategic hedging.

A final distinction can be made, once strategic hedging has been successfully identified, regarding the type of hedging being pursued and its primary aspirations. The diverse endeavours and stances, that together form the analysed behaviour of the actor and has been run through the mechanism, needs to be dissected and placed along the bottom spectrum of degree of balancing and alignment. This was taken from Kuik's own hedging spectrum of power rejection (balancing) and power acceptance (alignment). If the strategic behaviour of an actor, for example, is most importantly characterised by strong engagement, politically and economically, but also by a lesser degree of balancing with military endeavours running contrary to the targeted state's security interests, the median of the hedging behaviour will be further tipped towards alignment, and can therefore be considered to be political hedging, aimed at minimising risks of political vassalization. The opposite would be military hedging, aimed at minimising security risks. A balanced hedging behaviour

would likely signify an economic hedge, avoiding putting all the eggs in one basket. This approach differs from Kuik as it considers political hedging to be closer to the bandwagoning end of the spectrum rather than balancing. This was changed as political hedging, seeking to minimise the risk of political dependence, is rather best understood in the context of a state being increasingly dependent on another, and that therefore wishes to preserve political independence as much as possible but also cannot afford to stray too far from bandwagoning due to its dependency context. By hedging politically, the state remains mostly aligned with the targeted state with great engagement and alignment efforts, but soft to moderate balancing efforts might bring valuable political leverage. This also explains the choice to move away from Kuik's "degree of power rejection" and "degree of power acceptance", as degree of balancing and alignment offers a more suitable spectrum. Indeed, anything away from bandwagoning implies a certain degree of power rejection, even in the slightest.

This enhanced mechanism, developed here, benefits from far fewer limitations in its scope than earlier work from which it draws. It does not limit hedging to small states nor to middle powers, and it is not necessarily targeted at the system leader. It is also broad enough to engage in a different range of approaches and actions, enabling strategic hedging to be identified in varying behaviour rather than just in those that follow the most conventional and expected forms of engagement and balancing. The next part will identify the elements in Russia's behaviour in the South China Sea with its endeavours with Vietnam and China, during the 2012 - 2022 timeframe, and will run it once reviewed in the developed mechanism to identify or disqualify strategic hedging.

#### **4. Russia in the South China Sea and the Russo-Sino-Vietnamese triangle**

Before Russia's behaviour in the South China Sea can be run through the strategic hedging identification mechanism, the behaviour needs to be researched and mapped, as to have the elements in hand to run through each respective level. Thus will be examined Russia's diplomatic engagement, military and energy endeavours in the South China Sea in regards with the two case studies at hand, Vietnam, the potential hedge, and China, the target of the potential strategic hedging.

##### **4.1 Diplomatic absenteeism**

Despite announcing its "pivot to the East" and its aspiration to become an important Asian actor, Russia has consistently maintained in its official discourse being an uninvolved spectator in the critical South China Sea dispute, and as such neutral towards all parties involved and their respective positions. Asked about the dispute by a journalist, Putin asserted Russia's position to be that "with regard to the South China Sea [...] the Russian Federation is operating on the premise that every country in that region should be given a chance to resolve all arising controversial issues without the intervention of non-regional powers".<sup>38</sup> This stance however does go hand in hand with China's desire of keeping actors foreign to the South China Sea out of the dispute, whilst the other, smaller states have on the contrary called for more involvement from the international community.<sup>39</sup> China indeed holds disproportionate power and resources against the other smaller states in the South China Sea, including Vietnam, and thus benefits from the dispute being limited to the close circle of the concerned countries, particularly in regards to US involvement that could significantly affect the power balance. Russia hence has the opportunity to answer the calls of the rest of the

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<sup>38</sup> President of Russia, "Russian Energy Week International Forum plenary session", October 13, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Congressional Research Service, "U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress", February 5, 2024, 15. Teresa Chen and Alana Nance, "Water Wars: The Philippines Calls for a South China Sea Paradigm Shift", Lawfare, January 30, 2024.

smaller parties involved in the dispute, including Vietnam, to get involved, but has chosen a neutral diplomatic stance, indirectly benefiting China. Russia, furthermore, “pivoted to the East” and aspired to be taken as a credible Asian power, and its distancing from one of the most serious geopolitical dispute of the region has been perceived as discrediting.<sup>40</sup>

A significant political statement did occur in 2016, as the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) rendered her verdict on the South China Sea Arbitration. The Philippines had initiated a case against China’s aggressive claims in the South China Sea at the PCA, and the court ruled in the former’s favour on July 12, 2016.<sup>41</sup> The court’s ruling deemed China’s nine dash line as illegitimate and its historical claims over the Spratly and Paracel islands as having no legal basis.<sup>42</sup> Russia, although having maintained distance thus far from the dispute in its discourse, was quick to voice support to China. Answering to journalists at the G20 Summit in China soon after, Putin stated that “as far as the Hague Arbitration Court and its ruling are concerned, we agree with and support China’s position to not recognise the court’s ruling. [...] As is known, China did not go to the Hague Court of Arbitration and no one there listened to its position. So, how can these rulings possibly be deemed fair? We support China’s position on the issue”.<sup>43</sup> In a meaningful move in the immediate aftermath of the ruling, Russia and China held together a joint military exercise in the South China Sea, Joint Sea 2016.<sup>44</sup> The exercise ran over the course of eight days and was massive in scale, seeing some of the most important warships of the Russian and Chinese navy, and practising island seizing.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Blank, 112.

<sup>41</sup> U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What’s Next?”, July 12, 2016: 3.

<sup>42</sup> U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission: 3.

<sup>43</sup> President of Russia, “Answers to journalists’ questions”, September 5, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Brad Lendon and Katie Hunt, “China, Russia begin joint exercises in South China Sea”, CNN, September 12, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Sam LaGrone, “China, Russia Kick Off Joint South China Sea Naval Exercise; Includes ‘Island Seizing’ Drill”, U.S. Naval Institute News, September 12, 2016.



Russia has thus been careful to maintain in its discourse a neutral and uninvolved stance. This uninvolvedness however has been mostly beneficial to China, which as a major power with disproportionately more power than other parties involved in the dispute, benefits from it staying in a closed regional circle without the involvement of external actors. Russia did become politically involved nonetheless in 2016, following the PCA's ruling against China's claims in the South China Sea. Russia's discourse unequivocally sided with China, not recognising the ruling and with its navy participating in the Joint Sea 2016 exercises.

#### **4.2 Military endeavours**

Whilst reluctant to engage on a diplomatic level into the dispute, Russia's military endeavours in the South China Sea, chiefly with its "strategic partner" Vietnam, have been meaningful and impactful. As relations were reestablished by Moscow following Putin's advent and Russia "pivot to the East", arms trade and military ventures between Russia and Vietnam soared. The arms deal with Vietnam between 2012 and 2022 have been significant, and most importantly included six Kilo-class submarines, thirty two Su-30MK2 fighter aircrafts, ten Tarantul-class corvettes, two Gepard-class frigates and S-300 missile systems.<sup>46</sup> Representing billions of dollars worth of purchases, these deals have had a tremendous impact on Vietnam military capacities, particularly in its claimed South China Sea water, which has been at the primary drive for these strategic purchases.<sup>47</sup> To understand the significance of these purchases, attention must be paid to the capacities that these arms brought to Vietnam's forces, namely the capacity to strike deep within mainland China, critical anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capacities and a fleet able to navigate within the sea's

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<sup>46</sup> Derek Grossman, "Can Vietnam's Military Stand up to China in the South China Sea?," *Asia Policy* 13, no. 1 (January 2018): 119. Vladimir Karnozov, "Vietnam To Receive the Last 'Classic' Flankers", Aviation International News (AIN), April 28, 2016. Reuters, "Vietnam receives Russian-design missile boats amid maritime tension", June 2, 2015. Franz-Stefan Gady, "Vietnam Deploys Precision-Guided Rocket Artillery in South China Sea", *The Diplomat*, August 10, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Zachary Abuza and Nguyen Nhat Anh, "Vietnam's Military Modernization", *The Diplomat*, October 28, 2016.

shallow waters, operating out of the strategic Cam Ranh Bay.<sup>48</sup> Whilst lucrative deals for Russia, these pale in comparison to its arms deals with China, representing between 2018 and 2022 5,194 million trade-indicator values (TIV), against 622 million TIV with Vietnam during the same period.<sup>49</sup> These arms deals should therefore not be considered to be solely profit driven, as these endeavours have stirred up relations with China, with whom Russia's arms trade is immensely more lucrative.<sup>50</sup>

Besides its arms deals with Vietnam, joint military exercises represent the second major aspect of its behaviour's military side in the South China Sea. In another ambiguous move, Russia has taken part in joint military exercises with China in the sea, dubbed "Joint Sea", in 2014 and as aforementioned in 2016.<sup>51</sup> The scale of the forces deployed and drills performed, including island seizure, are strong indicators of the heavy geopolitical nature of the exercises as a show of dominance, demonstrating Chinese naval might in what it considers to be its territorial waters.<sup>52</sup> By taking part in these military ventures along with China, inside the claimed nine-dash line, Russia directly signals a degree of alignment with Beijing. These exercises, grand in scale and involving important elements of each's fleet, are important admonitions to refrain from labelling Russia's behaviour in the sea as hard balancing against China, just as its arms deals with Vietnam likewise refrain from the bandwagoning label, exposing an ambiguous behaviour.

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<sup>48</sup> Grossman, 119. Nicolas Jouan, "Vietnam's Area Denial Strategy and the South China Sea Dispute", *Geopolitical Monitor*, February 1, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and Statista Research Department, "Arms exports from Russia from 2018 to 2022, by country", Statista, March, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Blank, 111.

<sup>51</sup> Sam LaGrone, U.S. Naval Institute News.

<sup>52</sup> Minnie Chan, "China, Russia start joint naval exercise", *South China Morning Post*, May 20, 2014.

### 4.3 Energy endeavours

Energy endeavours with Vietnam represent the second key element of Russia's approach to the South China Sea. The seabed of the South China Sea, potentially rich in hydrocarbons, have been at the core of the dispute, and its exploration and exploitation have thus become an important dimension of it. As actors involved in the dispute lay claims to overlapping surfaces and exclusive economic zone (EEZ), attempts by parties to explore and exploit hydrocarbon in its claimed EEZ is often met with protest from another partie(s) with similar claim, and or from China that claims the sea near to its entirety. Vietnam, looking forward to the potential profit to be made from hydrocarbons laying in the seabed, has continuously sought to bring about foreign companies to explore and exploit it, although strong opposition and pressure from Beijing have made the task arduous.<sup>53</sup> Within waters claimed by China's nine-dash line, Russia however has been exploiting hydrocarbons on the account of Vietnam in five different blocks, 06-01 and 05-3-11 through Zarubezhneft, and 9-3-11, 9-3-12 and 04-03 through Vietsovetpetro.<sup>54</sup> The energy block 06-01 alone accounts for roughly thirty percent of Vietnam's gas demand.<sup>55</sup> Russia, through Zarubezhneft and the joint-companies of Vietgazprom and Vietsovetpetro, also hold significantly more Vietnamese hydrocarbon block licences for exploration and potential exploitation within the nine-dash line than any other foreign actors, including the UK and India.<sup>56</sup> These elements make Russia an important actor in asserting Vietnam's right to exploit resources in what it considers to be its EEZ, albeit a counterclaim and pressure from Beijing. This hydrocarbon exploitation in

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<sup>53</sup> Blank, 110-111.

<sup>54</sup> The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative and The Center for Strategic and International Studies, "South China Sea Energy Exploration and Development", 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Ian Storey, "Russia and China in Southeast Asia: Pragmatic cooperation against US primacy", ThinkChina, 15 September, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative and The Center for Strategic and International Studies.

turn provides legitimacy to Vietnam's claims, as it establishes a tangible presence and activity within its claims, something politically and often legally significant.

Similarly to that of its arms sales to Vietnam, Russia's energy ventures cannot be reduced to simple business ventures aiming for profit. Whilst hydrocarbons can be very lucrative, the cost of exploration at sea as well as its exploitation is tremendously high.<sup>57</sup> This is coupled with higher than usual cost of operation from which Russian hydrocarbon enterprises, including Gazprom and Zarubezhneft, have historically suffered, and make these energy endeavours in the South China Sea seldom profitable.<sup>58</sup> These endeavours, carrying modest potential, cannot therefore be explained as business ventures alone and carry political implications against China's assertiveness to the sea.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

Surveying Russia's behaviour in the South China Sea has thus exposed a seemingly paradoxical approach in regards to pseudo-neutrality, its energy and military endeavours with Vietnam, and its soft alignment with its "strategic partner" China. Russia has been cautious in its political discourse in avoiding involvement as an external actor, which agrees with China's directive on the matter. Russia did stray from its neutral stance in 2016 where it publicly voiced its support to China against the PCA's ruling, and took part in the massive-scale joint-military exercises in its aftermath. Russia's neutral stance and soft alignment stops there, however, as military and energy endeavours with Vietnam are impactful into the dispute and play against Beijing's interests in the South China Sea. Arms sales to Vietnam have significantly boosted the country's fighting abilities in the South China Sea, and whilst it is yet to match Chinese military might, it enhances Vietnam's political weight in the dispute through its increased military capacities and power projection to the sea. Russia has furthermore been at the forefront of hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation in the South

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<sup>57</sup> Baev and Tønnesson, 320.

<sup>58</sup> Baev and Tønnesson.

China Sea on the account of Vietnam. These energy endeavours have further improved Vietnam's political weight and bargaining power in the dispute, as the exploitation of hydrocarbons at sea constitute major arguments to substantiate one's maritime claims. Russia therefore would be ill-conceived as an uninvolved party to the South China Sea dispute, as its behaviour with Vietnam and China has been impactful to its dynamics.

## **5. Identifying strategic hedging in Russia's behaviour**

### **5.1 Strategic thinking (Level I)**

As previously discussed, the term "strategic hedging" indicates that a "strategic" element has to be present and identified in the behaviour as the first step into the analysis. Identified strategic thinking thus ensures that disinterest or mere diplomatic disagreement can be discarded to explain the analysed behaviour, and that it is rather guided as part of a broader strategy by a state's institutions and its officials. Writing on the debate regarding 'grand strategy', Silove identifies three different conceptualisations of the concept in the scholarship, that is as 'grand plans', 'grand principles', and 'grand behaviour'.<sup>59</sup> Here the first conceptualisation shall be utilised for the research, referring to "the deliberate efforts of individuals to translate a state's interests into specific long-term goals [...], and consider all spheres of statecraft (military, diplomatic, and economic) in the process of identifying the means by which to achieve them".<sup>60</sup> Importantly, the concept also holds that "grand plans are likely to be [...] set down in written documents".<sup>61</sup> In a compatible interpretation, the United States Department of Defense defines 'national strategy' as "the art and science of developing and using the diplomatic, economic, and informational powers of a nation,

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<sup>59</sup> Nina Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of 'Grand Strategy.'" *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 27.

<sup>60</sup> Silove, 49.

<sup>61</sup> Silove, 49.

together with its armed forces, during peace and war *to secure national objectives* [emphasis added]”.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, tangible objectives set at a national level are at the core of strategy and strategic thinking, and need to be unearthed in order to ascertain said strategic element guiding the behaviour. National objectives, in turn, are most notably outlined in the government’s political agenda, and in the overall political discourse and statements of its officials, as well as the policies and resolutions it set forth. To discern a strategic component to Russia’s behaviour with Vietnam and China in the South China Sea, overarching national objectives therefore need to be identified from these sources to ascertain strategic thinking, before delving into the deeper level of analysis. National objectives regarding Vietnam and China by Russia are best understood in the context of its “pivot to the East”, announced by Putin during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting at Russky Island in 2012. Having yet to recover from the 2008 recession, Russia’s turn to Asia was principally compelled by the economic prospects to be made by developing and improving bilateral relations with Asian states, many of whose economies were rapidly developing.<sup>63</sup> The furthering of relationships on all levels with Asian actors were clearly outlined to be national objectives.

### **5.1.1 Vietnam in Russia’s national objectives**

The relations between Vietnam and Russia more specifically predate the latter’s pivot to the East, but has not always been consistent in the past. Relations between the two are long-established, dating back to the emergence of socialist Vietnam during the Cold War, and the support it then received from the USSR. Initial relations between the USSR and Vietnam had been warm and mutually beneficial, with crucial military and economic aid provided

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<sup>62</sup> United States Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, August 31, 2005: 362.

<sup>63</sup> Yogesh Joshi, Ipeita Nishida and Nishant Rajeev, “The Bear in the Room: Russia and the Indo-Pacific”, *Special Report* No. 21, Institute of South Asian Studies Sasakawa Peace Foundation, May, 2022: 13.

from the former to the latter, and the establishment of a Soviet military base of strategic importance in Cam Ranh Bay.<sup>64</sup> Relations came to deteriorate from the mid 80s, however, as the USSR underwent perestroika reforms under Gorbachev's leadership and sought to improve relations with other Asian states, and Vietnam simultaneously underwent Doi Moi reforms, also seeking to build up other relationships.<sup>65</sup> Relations remained cordial but low in intensity following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and under Yeltsin's Russia as its attention turned westward and its economy was left in shambles.<sup>66</sup> The revitalization of relationship and regain of interest from the Russian government occurred with Putin's replacement of Yeltsin, and the abandonment of westward foreign policies that ensued in a context of rising tensions. Putin made his first official visit to Vietnam in 2001, and a "Joint Statement for a Strategic Partnership" was signed in Hanoi on 1 March by the two countries' leaders, making the development of relations with Vietnam a new tangible national objective in Putin's political agenda.<sup>67</sup> Putin made another official visit to Vietnam in 2006, during which he called for further development of the relationship.<sup>68</sup> During the 2008-2012 tandemocracy, Medvedev also visited Vietnam, following a similar agenda than that of Putin's.<sup>69</sup> Vietnamese officials were also invited on official visits to Russia, including General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to Sochi in 2014, during which Putin claimed that "the relations between Russia and Vietnam are those of a comprehensive strategic partnership".<sup>70</sup> Most

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<sup>64</sup> Tsvetov, 142.

<sup>65</sup> Tsvetov, 144.

<sup>66</sup> Vladimir Mazyrin, "Russia and Vietnam: Building a Strategic Partnership." In *ASEAN-Russia: Foundations and Future Prospects*, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2012: 173.

<sup>67</sup> Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the United States of America, "Joint Statement for a Strategic Partnership between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Russian Federation", May 3, 2001.

<sup>68</sup> President of Russia, "Joint Press Conference with President of Vietnam Nguyen Minh Triet following Russian-Vietnamese Talks", November 20, 2006.

<sup>69</sup> President of Russia, "Opening remarks at Russian-Vietnamese talks in expanded format", October 31, 2010.

<sup>70</sup> President of Russia, "Statement for the press after Russian-Vietnamese talks", November 25, 2014.

recently in 2021, a new “Joint statement on the vision for the development of relations of a comprehensive strategic partnership” was issued by the two parties, following Putin’s invitation to Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc to Russia, directly stating that “strengthening and increasing the effectiveness of a comprehensive strategic partnership is among the foreign policy priorities of Russia and Vietnam”.<sup>71</sup>

Looking at the actors “in the field” of the relationship, governmental guidance and involvement is also apparent. Military endeavours are directly controlled and set forth by the government as part of its political agenda. The arms sales, besides necessitating governmental approval, have been pushed for by the government as the pillar of the security element in the Russo-Vietnamese strategic partnership and its objectives. This includes the selling of the six Kilo-class submarines purchased by Vietnam in 2006, which saw Putin himself act as a witness to the deal’s signing in Moscow between Rosoboronexport and the Vietnamese Defence Ministry.<sup>72</sup> The sales of twelve Su-30 fighter aircrafts in 2013 and Gepard-class frigates saw the same level of involvement from Putin and other officials.<sup>73</sup>

Energy-wise, Russian dealings with Vietnam in the South China Sea have been principally conducted by the state-owned enterprises Zarubezhneft (state owned), Gazprom (50% state owned) and the joint-ventures Vietsovetro (49% owned by Zarubezhneft, 51% by Vietnam) and Vietgazprom (equal ownership between Gazprom and PetroVietnam).<sup>74</sup> These state-owned enterprises are the main actors in the energy endeavours that are themselves pushed for by Moscow. Along with trade and security, energy has consistently taken an

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<sup>71</sup> President of Russia, “Joint statement on the vision for the development of relations of a comprehensive strategic partnership between the Russian Federation and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for the period until 2030”, November 30, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “Russian Subs in Vietnam”, U.S. Naval Institute News, August 12, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Blank, “Russia’s Growing Ties with Vietnam”, The Diplomat, September 19, 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Hieu Anh, “VietsovPetro success story to get a new chapter”, Vietnam Investment Review, December 31, 2010. Zarubezhneft, “About company”, 2024. Gazprom, “About the Gazprom Group”, December, 2020.



important part of Russian officials discourse on Vietnam, reflected in the joint-statements and declarations.<sup>75</sup> It is thus possible to assert that Russia's behaviour with regards to Vietnam, on a systemic and regional level in the South China Sea, is being guided by the Russian government as part of its set national objectives, and can be identified as strategic thinking.

### **5.1.2 China in Russia's national objectives**

Relations with China, similarly to Vietnam, benefitted from initial fervour during the Cold War encouraged by the communist principle of "brotherhood and unity", that significantly deteriorated over time as a result of the Sino-Soviet split rivalry. The importance of the Sino-Russian relations resurfaced in both parties' political agendas in a similar fashion to that with Vietnam, following Putin's rise to power and the end of Russia's internal turmoil. Five months after Putin's visit to Hanoi and the joint declaration that ensued, China's General Secretary Jiang Zemin visited Russia in July 2001, and the "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation" was signed, marking an important step to the normalisation of relations between the two. With provisions over a twenty-year span ratified, the treaty was recently renewed for five additional years in June 2021.<sup>76</sup> Relations with China since the 2000s can be further identified as an important part in Russia's national objectives from the substantial part it has occupied in the political discourses and statements set forth by Russian institutions and officials, particularly since the 2012 pivot to the East and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. China is frequently referred to as a "strategic partner" to Russia by its officials, including Putin, and the aspiration to further the relationship as a major "objective" for Russia. Addressing journalists in 2015 prior to a visit to China, Putin asserted in unambiguous terms that the "*expansion of the Russian-Chinese partnership meets the interests and strategic goals*

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<sup>75</sup> Anton Bredikhin, "Južno-Kitajskoe more – real'nost' i podhod Rossii [South China Sea - reality and Russia's approach]", *Arhont* 29, no.2, (2022): 8.

<sup>76</sup> Reuters, "Russia, China extend friendship and cooperation treaty -Kremlin", June 28, 2021.

of our two countries”.<sup>77</sup> In recent developments, during Putin’s visit to Beijing in February 2022, a ‘no limits’ partnership between the two countries was announced, hitting to further intensification of the bilateral relations.<sup>78</sup> It is therefore also possible to assert that Russia’s behaviour with regards to China can be identified as strategic thinking, on a systemic and regional level, as it is being guided by the Russian government as part of its national objectives.

### **5.1.3 Conclusion**

As examined, Russia’s behaviour towards Vietnam and China can be considered to be strategic by nature. Both countries are often referred to as “strategic partners” in Russian discourse. Issued statements and policies set forth by Russian authorities distinctly refer to those strategic partnerships as being important parts of the country’s national objectives and political agenda. Turning to the actors in the field of those relationships, a direct link to the Russian government is observed, including the companies involved. With those elements in hand, it is possible to ascertain the strategic element in Russia’s behaviour towards China and Vietnam, thus eliminating the possibility of political disinterest or regular diplomatic dispute and move on to the next level of analysis.

### **5.2 Eliminating hard balancing and bandwagoning (Level II)**

Having validated the criteria A of the mechanism’s first level by identifying strategic thinking, the second level and its two criteria now aim to eliminate hard balancing and bandwagoning in the analysed behaviour. According to Paul, Wirtz and Fortmann, “*hard balancing* reflects the [...] realist approach of forming and maintaining open military alliances to balance a strong state or to forestall the rise of a power or a threatening state. A robust armament or re-armament program [...] is another prevalent way to achieve a balance of

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<sup>77</sup> TASS, “Putin: Russian-Chinese ties reach peak in their entire history and continue developing”, September 1, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Guy Faulconbridge and Laurie Chen, “Putin to visit China to deepen 'no limits' partnership with Xi”, Reuters, October 15, 2023.

power”.<sup>79</sup> This conventional definition highlights the most important element in distinguishing hard balancing in a behaviour, namely its scale. Hard balancing, as opposed to soft balancing, is grand in its scale, be it through open military alliances or intensive arms buildup, and is consequently overt and direct. To ensure that the analysed behaviour does not correspond to hard balancing and validate criterion B, one should therefore establish that a) the actor concerned with has *not* formed a military alliance directly aimed at the targeted state, and that b) it is not intensively pursuing arms buildup nor procurement aimed at hard balancing its target.

Whilst it can be difficult to ascertain the precise target of an actor’s arms buildup or procurement, a general idea can most often be drawn from the types of arms procured, the capacities that has been gained from it, and at last through the geographic deployment of the arms. A strong illustration of these characteristics, for example, has been the announcement in 2021 of the massive joint US-Canadian modernization project of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), whose development in northern Canada of the Northern Approaches Surveillance system is directly aimed at balancing Russian military in the Arctic, and more particularly the threat posed by its hypersonic Tsirkon missiles. Likewise, the targets or potential threats that formed military alliances aim to balance against are often indicated in the founding treaties, or can be identified by looking at the common capacities it aims to deploy and the geographic specifics. In another illustrative deed, the White House 2022 Arctic white paper declared its aspiration to “maximize our cooperation with Arctic Allies and partners to enhance our shared security and deter aggression in the Arctic, especially from Russia”.<sup>80</sup> These offer strong and relevant examples of hard balancing

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<sup>79</sup> T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007): 14.

<sup>80</sup> The White House, “The National Strategy for the Arctic Region”, October, 2022: 9.

behaviours, illustrating what defines as “balancing” and “hard” and must thus be absent in the analysed behaviour to pass criterion B.

The last criterion of this second level, C, seeks to eliminate bandwagoning in the examined behaviour. The definition set forth by Walt of bandwagoning remains amongst the most relevant and applicable today : “ Bandwagoning involves *unequal exchange*; the vulnerable state makes asymmetrical concessions to the dominant power and accepts a subordinate role. Most important of all, bandwagoning suggests a willingness to support or tolerate illegitimate actions by the dominant ally”.<sup>81</sup> This definition implies two elements enabling the distinction of bandwagoning in a behaviour, namely a position of subordination, and consequently political and military alignment from the subordinate, particularly towards illegitimate deeds. The focus should therefore be on the level of alignment from the actor to the target, ensuring that some disalignment is present, as well as the nature of the alignment.

### **5.2.1 Hard balancing (Criterion B)**

Russia has been heavily involved in the equipping and modernization of Vietnam’s armed forces and its navy, as previously discussed, however the relationship has never taken the step forward to form a military alliance and remains a “partnership”. Forming the basis of post-Soviet era relationships between Russia and Vietnam, the The Treaty on Principles of Friendly Relations between the Russian Federation and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed in Moscow in 1994 does not go beyond that of calling to “continue to maintain and develop friendly relations”.<sup>82</sup> Relevantly, the ninth article of the treaty further specifies that “this agreement [...] is not directed against any third party”. The next joint-statement in 2001 did evolve its title to include a “strategic partnership”, rather than the previous “friendly

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<sup>81</sup> Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation in Southwest Asia: Balancing and Bandwagoning in Cold War Competition” In *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland*, 1991: 55.

<sup>82</sup> The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies, “The Treaty on principles of friendly relations between the Russian Federation and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam”, 2019.

relations” of 1994. In its content, nevertheless, the statement did specify in a similar vein in its eight article that “the parties will strengthen cooperation in the defence field in the interests of the security of Russia and Vietnam. *This cooperation is not directed against third countries* [emphasis added]”.<sup>83</sup> The next round of relationship development came after Russia pivoted to the East in 2012, during Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang visit to Sochi that year, in which the “strategic partnership” was officially declared to be upgraded to a “comprehensive partnership”.<sup>84</sup> This upgraded comprehensive partnership saw security concerns and military cooperation given much more attention, whereas the previous statements and treaties had been more economically oriented. Once again however both parties felt once again necessary to assure that “Russia and Vietnam consider international security to be indivisible and comprehensive. The security of some states cannot be ensured at the expense of the security of others, including through the expansion of military-political alliances”. The last chapter in the military cooperation between Russia and Vietnam occurred with the Joint statement on the vision for the development of relations of a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2021. Setting goals for the relationship to attain by 2030, it once again saw an increase in the importance given to security and military elements compared with prior statements, in which the first article proclaims that “a special place in the structure of Russian-Vietnamese relations is occupied by interaction in the military, [...] which is progressively developing in the interests of Russia and Vietnam [...], helping to preserve peace and ensure stability in the region and on the planet as a whole”.<sup>85</sup> Whilst the overall

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<sup>83</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “A Joint Statement for a Strategic Partnership between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Russian Federation”, February 3, 2001.

<sup>84</sup> President of Russia, “Joint statement on strengthening the comprehensive strategic partnership between the Russian Federation and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam”, July 27, 2012.

<sup>85</sup> President of Russia, “Joint statement on the vision for the development of relations of a comprehensive strategic partnership between the Russian Federation and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for the period until 2030”, November 30, 2021.

tone is much more martial than previous treaties, it did not fail once again to attempt at avoiding being interpreted as hard balancing by claiming that “The parties stand for ensuring peace, stability and development in the region [...]. The development of Russian-Vietnamese relations is not aimed against any third party”.

These treaties and statements, forming the core of Russo-Vietnamese relations, highlight several important elements with regards to hard balancing. Most noticeable and significant is the efforts employed in order to pursue a bilateral rapprochement between the two countries, including military, whilst simultaneously ensuring that said rapprochement does not entail hard balancing against China. With such concerns in mind, every Russo-Vietnamese statement, albeit military matters’ growing importance, have steered clear from alliance making and emphasised the claim not to be targeting any third party.

Interviewed by Vietnamese and Japanese journalists, Foreign Minister Lavrov justified this stance by claiming “that if we really want to find a lasting solution to all security issues in the Asia-Pacific region, including in Southeast Asia, [...] *we must look not for a solution in blocs and military alliances*, but work out an inclusive format [...] so that no country would try to strengthen its security at the expense of others [emphasis added]”.<sup>86</sup> This is echoed by Hanoi, whose ‘three nos’ policy at the heart of its diplomacy include “no alliances”, to which it prefers a ‘bamboo diplomacy’ to navigate its relations with China and the US.<sup>87</sup> A direct connection is also drawn by Lavrov between Russia’s desire to avoid hard balancing against China and the restraint regarding military alliances it therefore implies, particularly with Vietnam and the South China Sea context. It should also be noted, moreover, that Hanoi is

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<sup>86</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview to Vietnamese and Japanese media, Moscow, March 16, 2018”, March 16, 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Reuters, “Vietnam's 'bamboo diplomacy' shifts into higher gear”, March 7, 2024. Thoi Nguyen, “The Trouble With Vietnam’s Defense Strategy”, The Diplomat, January 17, 2020.

not Moscow's sole recipient of a "strategic partnership", as for example India was similarly listed as such next to Vietnam in Russia's foreign policy decree no. 605 in 2012.<sup>88</sup>

Russia has thus been avoiding forming a military alliance against China, and attention must now be turned to its behaviour regarding arms buildup, deployment and military exercises with regards to China and the South China Sea. Regarding military exercises in the South China Sea, Russia has shown the same restraint with Vietnam as in the bilateral treaties between the two in avoiding hard balancing. Russia has up to now never held a joint naval exercise in the South China Sea with its comprehensive strategic partner Vietnam. The lack of naval exercises between Russia and Vietnam, despite having continuously intensified military cooperation and relations and in a region as strategically important to the latter, can also be attributed to Moscow's effort in avoiding hard balancing against Beijing. Russia did participate in 2021 in the ASEAN - Russia Naval Exercise (ARNEX21) with all ASEAN member states, including Vietnam.<sup>89</sup> Several elements, however, make ARNEX hard to label as a hard balancing effort with regards to China. The exercise was not a novelty, being the third of its kind, preceded in 2018 by the ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise (ACMX) and in 2019 by the ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise (AUMX). A further crucial aspect is that whilst both previous ACMX and AUMX took place in the South China Sea, albeit not within water claimed by China, the ARNEX kept clear of it and was held south of Indonesia, in the Java Sea. A last element to take into account is the limited scope and scale of ARNEX, which saw a single Russian warship and a three day duration, against height days for the two prior versions and a much more powerful naval presence.<sup>90</sup> These elements in hand, ARNEX can hardly be identified as a hard balancing behaviour on Russia's side against China. It is also

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<sup>88</sup> President of Russia, "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated 05/07/2012 No. 605: 4", July 5, 2012.

<sup>89</sup> Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Kingdom of Thailand, "On ASEAN – Russia Naval Exercise 2021 (ARNEX21)", December 10, 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Ian Storey, "Russia's Maritime Exercise With ASEAN: Punching Below Its Weight", ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, December 6, 2021.

interesting to contrast Russia's current approach to that of the USSR throughout the Cold War, which held several large-scale military exercises with Vietnamese forces in the South China Sea, directly targeted at China.<sup>91</sup>

The last point of hard balancing left to delve into is arms buildup and deployment. In that regard, two major components come into play, namely Russia's Pacific Fleet and Cam Ranh Bay in central Vietnam. The USSR had maintained, throughout the Cold War, a powerful naval presence in the South China Sea as part of their Pacific Fleet. As part of the strong rapprochement to Vietnam, the Soviets were allowed to station forces in Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay, which offered key strategic bases of operations over the South China Sea. From these ports the Soviets stationed bombers, reconnaissance aircrafts, and up to twenty-five warships, including submarines.<sup>92</sup> Just as its military exercises with Vietnam were aimed at balancing and pressuring Beijing, Soviet military presence in Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay had been directly targeted at China.<sup>93</sup> Post-Cold War Russia saw the quick disintegration of its Pacific Fleet, including its military presence in Vietnam, with the last remnants of it gone by 2002.<sup>94</sup> As Russia announced its pivot to the East in 2012, Cam Ranh Bay was given renewed attention once again due its strategic importance. As Russia increasingly became involved in the development of Cam Ranh Bay's infrastructure and economy, a new deal was struck in 2014 to allow Russian warships entry through a simple notification to Vietnamese port authorities, making it the only foreign actor with facilitated access to the bay.<sup>95</sup> The Cam Ranh Bay privilege granted by Vietnam carries strategic importance in the South China Sea, however Russian restraint in making use of it rules out a

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<sup>91</sup> Kenneth G. Weiss, "The Naval Dimension of the Sino-Soviet Rivalry." *Naval War College Review* 38, no. 1 (1985): 43.

<sup>92</sup> Weiss, 42-43.

<sup>93</sup> Weiss, 42.

<sup>94</sup> Pham Thi Yen, "Strategic Use of Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam's External Relations with Major Powers" *Strategic Analysis* 45, no. 1 (2021): 40.

<sup>95</sup> TASS, "Russia, Vietnam agree on simplified Cam Ranh port entry for Russian warships", November 27, 2014.



hard balancing behaviour against China. Even though Russia has been provided with privileged access to Cam Ranh Bay, its navy has rarely made the trip to the bay, with only three visits by Russian warships between 2016 and 2020, compared to eight by the US over the same period.<sup>96</sup> It was revealed in 2015 that Vietnam also allows Russian Il-78 refuelling tanker aircraft to use the bay's Air base, which in turn enabled the in-flight refuelling of its Tu-95 Bear bombers during operations across the Pacific.<sup>97</sup> This however mainly concerned operations consisting of Russian bomber flights near US Pacific territory, particularly Guam, and not aimed at Chinese interests.<sup>98</sup> China, on the contrary, can be expected to approve of Russia's hard balancing against the US Pacific presence. These elements have thus demonstrated that Russia's absence of military exercises with Vietnam in the South China Sea, its meagre use and military presence in Cam Ranh Bay, as well as the previously discussed restraint from formal alliances make hard balancing unfit to label Russia's behaviour.

### **5.2.2 Bandwagoning (Criterion C)**

Illegitimate actions by China in the South China Sea abound, and are the heart of the dispute. These actions most prominently include the intensive militarization of several Parcel and Spratly islands, the development of artificial islands and the use of its coast guard to deny access to the sea by the contenders' military and fishing vessels.<sup>99</sup> These actions, carried out well beyond Chinese territorial water and EEZ, are illegal as per the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which China is a signatory, and Beijing's justification behind its nine-dash line was further deemed illegitimate by the PCA's South China Sea Arbitration in 2016. Russia, throughout Beijing's illegitimate deeds in the

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<sup>96</sup> Yen, 41.

<sup>97</sup> David Brunnstrom, "U.S. asks Vietnam to stop helping Russian bomber flights", Reuters, March 11, 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Brunnstrom.

<sup>99</sup> Shashank Bengali and Vo Kieu Bao Uyen, "Sunken boats. Stolen gear. Fishermen are prey as China conquers a strategic sea", Los Angeles Times, November 12, 2020.

South China Sea, has not expressed any form of support toward these. Russia has not been vocal in criticising those deeds either, even as they clashed with its Vietnamese strategic partner, and instead has kept in its neutral stance a discourse of calling all parties to follow international law and UNCLOS. The most striking aspect of bandwagoning is therefore absent in Russia's behaviour, and attention must now be paid to determine if it is nonetheless in a subordinate role to China.

A subservient nature could be difficult to assert, as often appearances of sovereignty try to be maintained, but an examination of Russia's behaviour in its bilateral and multilateral interactions in the South China Sea can be helpful in such regards. Russia partaking in the three ASEAN-Russia summits is amongst the most significant of these interactions, highlighting political autonomy from Russia, away from subservience. China has also always preferred to avoid dealing with ASEAN regarding the South China Sea dispute, as it holds much more political weight in bilateral interactions than in multilateral interactions against a concerted ASEAN.<sup>100</sup> It has also for that same purpose continuously stalled the development of a code of conduct for the South China Sea, something that has been important to all the other parties involved in the dispute.<sup>101</sup> At the 2016 Asean-Russia summit in Sochi, the Sochi Declaration called in its tenth article to “ support the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and early conclusion of an effective Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) on the basis of consensus”.<sup>102</sup> In its third ASEAN-Russia summit held in Singapore in 2018, the nineteenth article further

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<sup>100</sup> Bill Hayton, “After 25 Years, There's Still No South China Sea Code of Conduct”, Foreign Policy, July 21, 2021.

<sup>101</sup> Raymond Powell, “A South China Sea Code of Conduct Cannot Be Built on a Foundation of Bad Faith”, The Diplomat, November 18, 2023.

<sup>102</sup> ASEAN, “Sochi Declaration of the ASEAN-Russian Federation Commemorative Summit to Mark the 20th Anniversary of ASEAN-Russian Federation Dialogue Partnership “Moving Towards a Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit””, 2016.

reiterated the same ambition regarding the development of the COC.<sup>103</sup> This is ultimately demonstrative that Russia has not been reduced politically to a subordinate role to China in the South China Sea dispute, as it has shown political autonomy in the multilateral interactions with ASEAN it has engaged in.

### **5.2.3 Conclusion**

The analysis of several facets of Russia's behaviour in the South China Sea, with regards to Vietnam and China, has made it possible to determine that Russia is neither actively hard balancing against China, nor has it been bandwagoning. Russia has not performed military exercises with Vietnam in the South China Sea, and its military presence at Cam Ranh Bay has been minimal and US-targeted. In the political dimension, Russia has not supported nor condoned Beijing's illegal activities in the sea, including against its strategic partner Vietnam. Russia has also shown political autonomy through its multilateral engagements with ASEAN, and the common push for a COC that ensued.

### **5.3 Soft balancing and alignment (Level III)**

The third and final level of the mechanism seeks to identify soft balancing and soft alignment, occurring simultaneously and thus signalling the core ambiguity of strategic hedging. In Brooks and Wohlforth work, "soft balancing" is defined as a form in which "the dynamics of countervailing power are still present, but *operate at a lower, less comprehensive level* than in the typical conception of balancing [emphasis added]".<sup>104</sup> When hard balancing, as previously explored, included military alliances and massive arms build-up, soft balancing is more subtle and less intensive. Being subtle and weaker, soft balancing efforts can be challenging to ascertain in a behaviour although not unworkable. As in hard balancing, the foremost characteristic of a soft balancing behaviour is that it is running against the interests,

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<sup>103</sup> ASEAN, "Joint Statement of the 3rd ASEAN-Russian Federation Summit on Strategic Partnership", 2018.

<sup>104</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 60.

primarily security related, of its target. More precisely, the soft balancing efforts must have been specifically conducted in that optic as a deliberate choice by the soft balancing actor against its target. Military endeavours that carry over unfortunate and undesirable ramifications would be ill classified as soft balancing, and would correspond more to standard diplomatic friction as it occurs in international relations. In addition to being targeted, the efforts must also be consequential enough, as arms sales, cooperation and deployment all other military facets take place to varying degrees of intensity, from purely profit driven small arms sale to nuclear arms race. This intensity however must be limited, lest it become overt hard balancing, and conversely inconspicuous. The indirect soft balancing behaviour most often happens by proxy, through which the balancing actor by its military endeavours indirectly balances against a third party. Subtleness can also be displayed by internal arms buildup, without the intensity of an arms race and not deployed in an aggressive manner, corresponding to specific threats from the target of the soft balancing.

Soft alignment shares similar characteristics, being of lower intensities than bandwagoning as well as showing more subtlety. Writing upon alignment, Miller and Toritsyn define the concept as follows, based upon Walt and David's work : "a relationship between two or more states that involves mutual expectations of *some degree of policy coordination on security issues* under certain conditions in the future [emphasis added]".<sup>105</sup> Like soft balancing, soft alignment presents some degree of foreign policy coordination whilst avoiding its extreme, bandwagoning. It has already been established in criterion E of the previous level that Russia is not bandwagoning China in the South China Sea, and this criterion D will now examine whether it does however show a more moderate level of

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<sup>105</sup> Eric A. Miller and Arkady Toritsyn, "Bringing the Leader Back In: Internal Threats and Alignment Theory in the Commonwealth of Independent States." *Security Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 333.

alignment with China in its foreign policy over the South China Sea, and therefore be classified as soft alignment behaviour.

### **5.3.1 Soft balancing (Criterion D)**

Hard balancing behaviour was set aside in criterion B, but soft balancing in turn offers a pertinent interpretation of Russia's approach. Following the intensification of relations between Moscow and Hanoi since the former pivot to the East and the upgrade to a 'comprehensive' strategic partnership, Moscow has been a pillar to Vietnam armament development. Representing over 80% of Hanoi's weapons procurement, Russia's role in the modernisation of the Vietnamese armed forces and navy have been critical.<sup>106</sup> This important supply of arms from Russia in turn had had noteworthy security implications for China. As a principal contender to Beijing in the South China Sea dispute, in both the Paracel and Spratly islands, Vietnam's military modernisation has been meaningful to the region's dynamics.

Acquiring a modern and robust blue water navy had been a long time ambition of Vietnam, particularly submarines. This ambition was nearly achieved in the 80s when the USSR offered to sell Vietnam its heavily armed Foxtrot-class submarines. As the deal came closer to existence and Vietnamese submarine crews began training, the deal was dropped by Gorbachev in a move aimed at avoiding a worsening of relations with Beijing.<sup>107</sup> A submarine deal came back on the table, however, in 2009 as relations redeveloped for six Kilo-class submarines, and the final one was delivered in 2017.<sup>108</sup> These six Kilo-class submarines, diesel-powered, are remarkably stealthy, capable of striking adversary submarines, surface vessels and land targets as well as navigating shallow waters such as the

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<sup>106</sup> Francesco Guarascio and Khanh Vu, "Vietnam shifts gears on arms trade as it loosens ties with Russia", Reuters, December 7, 2022.

<sup>107</sup> Carlyle Thayer, "Russian Subs in Vietnam", U.S. Naval Institute, August 20, 2012.

<sup>108</sup> Defense Aerospace, "Russia Delivers Last Project 636.1 Diesel-Electric Submarine to Vietnam", January 25, 2017.

South China Sea.<sup>109</sup> These six submarines joined Vietnamese navy's 4th regional command, headquartered in Cam Ranh Bay, whose zone of defence include all of the critical Spratly and Paracel islands in the South China Sea.<sup>110</sup> The Gepard-class frigates that Russia additionally sold to Vietnam also joined the 4th regional command to the South China Sea.<sup>111</sup> The frigates, fitted for both combat and patrol at sea, are equipped with anti-submarine, anti-aerial, anti-ship and electronic warfare capacities, as well as being able to carry a military helicopter.<sup>112</sup> The Tarantul-class corvettes were also attached to the 4th regional command, and were similarly provided with Russia's supersonic Kh-35 anti-ship.<sup>113</sup> A clear focus has been present on building a blue water fleet with A2/AD and patrolling capacities for Vietnam in the South China Sea, and this expansion has increased its credibility as a contender, and thus its political weight in the dispute.

The arms sold by Russia have therefore been decisive in enhancing Vietnam's military capabilities in the South China Sea, most notably over the disputed Paracel and Spratly islands, and represent as such an indirect balancing against the region's hegemon and dominant contender, China. Gorbachev backed out of the submarine deal with Vietnam in the 80s precisely out of concerns that balancing against China was not desirable. Providing submarines to Vietnam today carries over the same, arguably more, security concerns for China in the South China Sea. Russia equipping Vietnam with six Kilo-class submarines is therefore indicative of the balancing nature of the deal in regards to China, and were certainly interpreted this way in China. Reporting on the matter, China Youth Daily, the official newspaper of the Communist Youth League of China, claimed that "the purpose of targeting

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<sup>109</sup> Brent M. Eastwood, "Kilo-Class: What Makes This Russian Submarine So Dangerous?", *The National Interest*, January 5, 2024.

<sup>110</sup> GlobalSecurity, "Vietnamese People's Navy", September 25, 2014.

<sup>111</sup> GlobalSecurity.

<sup>112</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, "Vietnam to Receive 2 Russian Anti-Submarine Warfare Ships in 2016", *The Diplomat*, May 18, 2016.

<sup>113</sup> Felix K. Chang, "Resist and Reward: Vietnam's Naval Expansion", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, November 6, 2019.

China is very obvious” and that “in the long run, Russia's approach of arming Vietnam seems to have strategic considerations in balancing the rising power of China”.<sup>114</sup>

Russia’s military deals with Vietnam, however, must be contrasted to that of the People's Liberation Army in order to relativize the intensity of Hanoi’s arms buildup, ensuring that the behaviour remains indeed confined at the soft balancing end of the spectrum. Russia did enable Vietnam through the purchase of its arms to significantly strengthen their military capabilities in the South China Sea, but those developments have not brought Vietnam to a level at which it would be capable to rival and defeat the Chinese armada was the dispute to devolve. Whilst Vietnam’s 4th regional command has Russian submarines, frigates and corvettes, the regional balance of power remains asymmetrical and drastically tipped towards Beijing. China’s South Sea Fleet, its counterpart, keeps its vessels at the Yulin Naval Base in Sanya, south of the Hainan Island and in Zhanjiang, Guangdong.<sup>115</sup> Its fleet includes an aircraft carrier, an amphibious assault ship, eight diesel-electric submarines, a dozen destroyers, and a similar number of landing ships, frigates and corvettes.<sup>116</sup> This asymmetrical might of China’s South Sea Fleet puts into perspective the real capacities for A2/AD that Vietnam’s Russian armament provides, and illustrates the soft rather than hard balancing nature of the deals. Vietnam’s transition from a green water to blue water fleet through Russian purchases is most beneficial to Hanoi by increasing the costs Beijing would have to endure if a conflict in the South China Sea were to occur. With its enhanced capabilities, Vietnam is still unlikely to be able to rival China, but the increased

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<sup>114</sup> Liu Shidong, “Vietnam will become Russia’s third largest arms export destination [Yuenan jiang cheng eluosi disanda wuqi chukou duixiang guo]”, *China Youth Daily*, October 26, 2012: 4. Chi Ye, “Vietnam wants to lure Russia back to Cam Ranh Bay [Yuenan yu yin eluosi chongfan jinlan wan]”, *China Youth Daily*, July 30, 2012: 4.

<sup>115</sup> Damen Cook, “China’s Most Important South China Sea Military Base”, *The Diplomat*, March 9, 2017.

<sup>116</sup> Peter Wood, “Snapshot: China’s Southern Theater Command”, *China Brief* 16, no.12, August 1, 2016: 3.

cost of a conflict could be taken into account by Beijing in its strategic calculation, and present open military offensive as a too costly, non viable option.

Arms deals aside, energy endeavours with Vietnam constitute another facet of soft balancing from Moscow. With water claimed by both China and Vietnam, the exploration for hydrocarbons in the sea bed and their potential exploitation has been a contentious issue. Beijing has long expressed its strong opposition to foreign companies being contracted by other claimants to explore and exploit hydrocarbons within the nine-dash line, demonstrated by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson statement on the matter that “as for oil and gas exploration activities, our consistent position is that we are opposed to any country engaged in oil and gas exploration and development activities in waters under China's jurisdiction”.<sup>117</sup> This hostility to foreign enterprise in the sea can be explained by the desire of Beijing to prevent other claimants from reaping the profits of hydrocarbons it desires for itself, and additionally prevent those other claimants from strengthening their claims through active economic activities. For these reasons, prior companies contracted by Vietnam to explore and exploit hydrocarbons in its EEZ but within the nine-dash line have failed. This was notably the case for British Petroleum, with whom Vietnam plans made deals in the early 2000s for the exploration and exploitation of block 5.2, in its EEZ but also within the nine-dash line. As the company began exploring in 2007, intense pressure from Beijing successfully derailed the project and British Petroleum soon after announced its abandonment.<sup>118</sup> Asked about the situation, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson declared that “Vietnam's series of new actions infringing on China's sovereignty, sovereign power and administrative rights in the Spratly Islands”.<sup>119</sup> A similar situation occurred more recently in 2017 when Spanish Repsol stopped its exploration of block 136/3 licensed by

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<sup>117</sup> Liu Sheng, “India makes waves with South China Sea oil and gas exploration”, Global Times, September 17, 2011.

<sup>118</sup> Reuters, “BP halts Vietnam exploration plan due China dispute”, August 9, 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Reuters, “BP gas project in South China Sea "normal" -Vietnam”, August 9, 2007.



Vietnam following strong pressure from Beijing, after nearly thirty million dollars worth of investment had already been provided.<sup>120</sup>

Russian companies, on the other hand, have been successful at exploiting several blocks within the nine-dash lines on the account of Vietnam, including the coveted block 5.3.<sup>121</sup> These energy endeavours are not only significant economically, by providing over a third of Vietnam's need for gas, but also because of its political impact on the dispute.<sup>122</sup> As the previously discussed cases have exposed, hydrocarbons within the nine-dash line entails strong hostility from Beijing, which perceives it as contrary to its interest in the dispute. The willingness of Russia, through its state-owned companies such as Zarubezhneft, to explore and exploit hydrocarbons through Vietnamese licences and to ignore Beijing's grievances can thus be further identified as soft balancing efforts from Russia. Through these endeavours, Moscow directly provides Hanoi with more political weight by having active economic activities being carried out within its claims. Tangible economic activities over time have been at the forefront of all contenders' arguments for their claims in the South China Sea, making Russia's endeavours impactful.<sup>123</sup>

### **5.3.2 Soft alignment (Criterion E)**

The last criterion in the mechanism to pass before the behaviour can be identified as strategic hedging is the need for soft alignment. Criterion C of the previous level refuted bandwagoning behaviour, but leaves ample room for more moderate forms of alignment from Russia with the target, China. Russia's political absenteeism from the South China Sea dispute, as well as its maintaining of a neutral discourse on the matter, could be perceived as

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<sup>120</sup> Jose Elías Rodríguez, "Repsol says drilling suspended on Vietnam oil block disputed by China", Reuters, August 2, 2017.

<sup>121</sup> The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative and The Center for Strategic and International Studies.

<sup>122</sup> Storey.

<sup>123</sup> Mark E. Rosen, "Philippine Claims in the South China Sea: A Legal Analysis", The Center for Naval Analyses, August, 2014: 46.

driven by a legitimate desire to keep away from the dispute. Several elements, however, indicate that Russia's neutral stance could be instead interpreted in the light of the soft balancing concept. The South China Sea dispute is of paramount importance on both international and regional scenes, carrying over major global implications. Through the announcement of its pivot to the East in 2012, Russia announced its aspiration to turn its attention eastward, both politically and economically, and its aim to be recognized as a major Asian power. With such aspirations, it has been expected of Russia to step up its involvement in the regional affairs, including the South China Sea dispute due to its importance, if it were to succeed at being recognised as a credible Asian actor. This is further accentuated by the comprehensive strategic partnership between Vietnam and Russia, a major contender in the dispute, further increasing the expectations for Moscow's involvement.

Russia however, otherwise known for its otherwise relentless involvement into international quarrels, has continuously restrained itself away from the dispute. Moscow did participate in the previously discussed ASEAN-Russia summits, but those were principally oriented towards multilateral economic cooperation and whilst the COC was occasionally referred, the dispute has been largely set aside in their agendas.<sup>124</sup> For the rest of its diplomacy, Moscow remained silent on the dispute and kept a neutral tone when questioned upon it. This seemingly inconsistent approach can therefore hardly be considered to be solely caused by a lack of interest or a true desire to remain neutral. It could be argued instead that Moscow's willingness to miss out on the dispute and cope with a certain loss of credibility is best explained by Beijing's desire to keep foreign countries out of the dispute, including Russia.<sup>125</sup> China indeed stands to benefit the most from the dispute being locked on a regional level between local actors, the power balance between China and other contenders being as

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<sup>124</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, "ASEAN and the EEU: Close to Free Trade Zone?", *The Diplomat*, August 09, 2016.

<sup>125</sup> Brian Spegele, "Beijing Warns Against Sea Meddling", *The Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2011.

asymmetrical as it is. It is for the same reason that China has been unwilling to engage with ASEAN, as member states banded together hold more political weight than on themselves against China in bilateral negotiations. Beijing has thus repeatedly ‘warned’ foreign actors to keep clear of the South China Sea business, wanting to preserve the balance of power in their favour as is. In that light, Moscow’s neutral stance and discourse could therefore be best interpreted as soft political alignment with Beijing, as the latter stands to gain and the former to miss out.

An even more apparent soft alignment effort came from Russia in 2016 with regards to the PCA South China Sea arbitration. The arbitration, as previously discussed, ruled in favour of the Philippines against China and was met with immediate criticism from Russia. Russia shares with China a common animosity towards international courts, and was itself in the midst of the Arctic Sunrise case against the Netherlands at the PCA, to which it did not send representatives to either.<sup>126</sup> Ukraine had also filed an application<sup>127</sup> against Russia in 2014 at the European Court of Human Rights, following the annexation of Crimea and the sponsor of separatist militias in the Donbass.<sup>127</sup> Moscow’s reaction however went beyond simple solidarity between two countries in similar ordeals, as the Joint-Sea 2016 exercise in itself was a meaningful move. The scale of the exercise, the drills performed and the immediacy with which it took place leave no ambiguity on the assertiveness of its nature. The large number of Russian vessels participating in the exercise alongside Chinese vessels cannot be interpreted differently than alignment. The careful and ambiguous approach of Russia through all the elements previously analysed prevent one from using Joint-Sea 2016 to claim bandwagoning on Russia’s part, but soft alignment instead relevant.

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<sup>126</sup> Permanent Court of Arbitration, “The Arctic Sunrise Arbitration (Netherlands v. Russia)”, 27 April, 2019.

<sup>127</sup> European Court of Human Rights, “UKRAINE v. RUSSIA”, September 1, 2015.

### **5.3.3 Conclusion**

The ambiguity at the heart of Russia's approach to the South China Sea dispute has become clear throughout this level, as Moscow was successfully identified as both soft balancing against Beijing and soft aligning with it. Soft balancing has been undeniable on Russia's part when considering its role in the military modernization of Vietnamese forces, with a particular emphasis on its South China Sea capabilities. This increased capabilities, through lucrative arms deals, have not enabled Vietnam to rival Beijing's South Sea Fleet, but have empowered the former's navy enough to increase its presence amongst the Paracel and Spratly islands, and has thus increased its political weight in the dispute. Russia has simultaneously aligned with China to a certain degree, through its absenteeism in the dispute and its vocal support against the 2016 PCA arbitration against Beijing and the consequent joint exercise in the sea that followed. Both criteria, D and E, have thus been validated and the mechanism's conclusion can now be reached.

### **5.4 Asserting strategic hedging**

Having successfully run the behaviour through the first, second and third level, a final conclusion can now be reached, namely that Russia's behaviour in the South China Sea corresponds to strategic hedging. To reach this conclusion, five requirements had to be successfully passed. First, strategic thinking on Russia's part has been identified, mainly through its joint-statements and treaties in which the development of relations with both Vietnam and China have been explicitly stated forth as national objectives in Moscow's political agenda. This makes it possible to set aside regular diplomatic friction, as the behaviour is being guided at the highest level and as part of a broader strategic end. Second, hard balancing had to be eliminated from the behaviour. This has been the case, as Russia never ventured into military alliances and rather maintained a 'comprehensive strategic' partnership with Vietnam and has been careful about publicly maintaining that said

partnership was not targeting any third party. Russia has also never held joint military exercises with Vietnam in the South China Sea, also restraining itself from hard balancing Beijing. Third, the other end of the spectrum, bandwagoning, had to be eliminated. Bandwagoning was successfully discarded as Russia never voiced support or legitimised the illegal deeds carried out by China in the South China Sea, and has shown a degree of political autonomy through its multilateral endeavours with ASEAN. Fourth, identifiable soft balancing efforts were needed in the behaviour. Soft balancing efforts were readily identifiable in Russia's behaviour through its arms deals with Vietnam, including the sales of submarines, frigates, corvettes and supersonic missiles. These significant enhancement of Vietnamese capacities in the South China Sea, have not enabled the latter to rival the Chinese armada but did provide Hanoi with more political weight into the dispute. Fifth, finally, needed soft alignment efforts to be identified in the behaviour. Whilst less pronounced than the soft balancing efforts, soft alignment endeavours were found. Most notably, Russia's have been very vocal in 2016 in criticising the PAC arbitration against China, and took part in the meaningful joint-exercise in its wake. Russia's avoidance of being involved in the South China Sea dispute has been on par with Beijing's stance on the matter, and also represents a case of soft alignment from Russia.

The conclusion at last is thus that Russia is indeed strategically hedging against China in the South China Sea, with Vietnam as an hedge. Taking into account what has been previously discussed, it can be further argued that the specific kind of strategic hedging pursued by Russia corresponds to political hedging, aimed at minimising risks of political vassalization. This is demonstrated by the limited scale and impact of Russia's soft balancing efforts with Vietnam, which makes its strategizing hedging closer to the bandwagoning end of the spectrum rather than the hard balancing end. The next and final section will explore the

motives and implications behind Russia's strategic hedging, as well as its political hedging dimension.

## **6. Motives and Implications**

Based upon the successful run through the mechanism, as previously discussed, Russia is found to be strategically hedging against China in the South China Sea. Being a deliberate strategic choice, however, brings about further questions about what motives have been the driving forces behind the choice, and what are its implications. Here a structural theory is relevant and useful to determine the motives at hand. In his structural theory, Tessman argues that a strategic choice is determined by the system polarity and its power concentration trend. Alternative strategic choices such as hedging, on the other hand, can come to be based on additional and conditional factors.<sup>128</sup> The current system polarity, since 1991, has been dominated by the American unipole, and the power concentration trend has been significantly flowing out of the US and towards China, the rising giant. This would explain traditional strategic choices for Russia, namely balancing or bandwagoning China as it concentrates power. As this research has demonstrated, Russia in the South China Sea is instead strategically hedging against China, and thus attention must be paid to the conditional factors that have been behind the alternative strategy.

The first identifiable conditional factor is Beijing's approach to Central Asia and the Arctic vis-à-vis Russia. As per the Primakov doctrine, well anchored in the minds at Kremlin, the five 'stans of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), are part of Russia's near abroad and in its 'sphere of influence'.<sup>129</sup> For Russia to maintain a great power status, the doctrine holds as imperative that no foreign influence

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<sup>128</sup> Tessman, 196.

<sup>129</sup> Monika Eriksen, "Assessing Russia's doctrine of Realpolitik as strategic re-contouring of regional power-balance in the post-Soviet periphery." *Politeja*, no. 41 (2016): 308-309.

penetrate its sphere. China, however, has been over the past decade intensifying its presence in Central Asia, including through Beijing's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments. Russia has therefore felt threatened by what it perceives as Chinese encroachment in its 'backyard' and its interest. This can be identified as a relevant motive for Russia to balance against China in the South China Sea, as a counterblow in what conversely Beijing considers to be its own 'backyard'. Russia has also been possessive over vast parts of the Arctic since its return to the region in 2008, backing its claims through historical arguments. China, on the contrary, claims in its discourse the Arctic to be a 'common heritage of mankind', and supplemented the BRI with the Polar Silk Road (PSR) in 2017, adding an Arctic component to its megaproject.<sup>130</sup> This further adds as a motive for Moscow's to balance against Beijing.

The research has established however that Russia is not hard balancing against China, and important additional factors come into play to explain its alternative choice. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, following the Maidan revolution, saw heavy sanctions from the US and its allies fall on Russia. This political economic alienation has compelled Russia to reorient its gas and oil exportations, upon which its economy is highly dependent, towards China and other Asian partners. Moscow's dependency on China greatly intensified following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, leading experts to refer to a 'vassalization' of Russia to China, as Moscow increasingly depends politically and economically on Beijing.

These conditional factors considered together, it becomes apparent that the alternative choice of strategic hedging is convenient for Moscow. China represents a threat to Russia's influence in Central Asia and the Arctic, but hard balancing remains unthinkable due to the developing political and economic dependency. The middle position, strategic hedging, is

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<sup>130</sup> Kobzeva Mariia, "China's Arctic Policy: Present and Future." *The Polar Journal* 9, no. 1 (2019): 97. Erdem Lamazhapov, Iselin Stensdal and Gørild Heggelund, "China's Polar Silk Road: Long Game or Failed Strategy?", The Arctic Institute, November 14, 2023.

therefore not only suitable, it also offers a means to limit ‘vassalization’ as much as possible through its soft balancing elements. Going back to the Primakov doctrine, the pursuit of multipolarity with Russia amongst the principal poles with an independent foreign policy stands at the very core of its doctrinal thinking, and being relayed to a second or third rate power should be prevented at all costs, lest its national interests and security be compromised.<sup>131</sup> This implies in turn that Moscow is likely to continue its strategic hedging as long as possible in the future as damage control to its dependency, but could switch to bandwagoning if its power status continues to devolve.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research has found Russia to be strategically hedging against China in the South China Sea, with Vietnam as an hedge. This strategic hedging has been characterised by simultaneous soft balancing and soft alignment elements. The soft balancing acts were mainly channelled through the arms and energy deals with Hanoi, providing a modernised navy, more political weight and a solidified claim. These remained limited in scales however, and are still best identified as soft balancing. The soft alignment act took the form of disinvolvement but also active support against the PCA arbitration in 2016, including the Joint-Sea exercise that soon followed. The hedging strategic choice can be best explained by analysing the conditional factors behind it. China is challenging Russia in both Central Asia and the Arctic, which is considered by the latter as its ‘backyard’, and therefore has incentives to balance China in its own ‘backyard’. However Russia’s increasing political and economic dependence on China since 2014, and ever more so since the invasion of Ukraine, prevents hard balancing. Strategic hedging has thus been pursued by Russia as a way to minimise the ‘vassalization’ it is facing from China, whilst avoiding overt hostilities against

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<sup>131</sup> Eugene Rumer, “The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action”, *The Return of Global Russia*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (June, 2019): 5.



the power it is dependent upon. In her influential article, Goh claims “that hedging is, in fact, a luxury of the relatively weak only”, and one could argue that it is further demonstrative of the current ordeal Moscow finds itself in.<sup>132</sup> The future of Russia’s approach to the South China Sea is hence linked to its power concentration trend, as a continuous depreciation of Russia’s power as is currently seen would likely result in the abandonment of hedging for bandwagoning. It additionally implies that Russia’s impact on the South China Sea dispute is expected to remain moderate, possibly declining in the future.

### **Summary**

La dispute pour les eaux et les îles en Mer de Chine méridionale représente l’un des enjeux géopolitique mondial actuel des plus importants, de par ses acteurs ainsi que ses conséquences potentielles. Les convoitises en Mer de Chine méridionale, débutant principalement dans les années 70, s’expliquent par les riches ressources poissonnières dans ses eaux, dont dépendent une grande partie des communautés côtières de la région, ainsi que la présence d’hydrocarbure dans ses fonds marins. Elle est également cruciale comme route maritime pour le fret mondiale, débouchant sur l’important détroit de Malacca. Dans ce contexte, il est intéressant de s’interroger également sur l’approche de la Russie dans cette dispute aux implications mondiales et qui implique directement deux pays avec lesquels Moscou a entretenu des relations étroites, la Chine et le Vietnam. Les auteurs Blank et Korolev identifient celle-ci dans leurs travaux comme correspondant à de l’*hedging* stratégique, le Vietnam étant l’*hedge* de Moscou et la Chine sa cible. L’objectif de cette recherche est donc d’analyser plus profondément l’approche de la Russie en Mer de Chine méridionale à travers la question de recherche suivante : “En quoi les activités de la Russie

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<sup>132</sup> Goh: 2.

avec le Vietnam en mer de Chine méridionale constituent-elles un ‘hedging’ stratégique à l’égard de la Chine ?”.

À cette fin, un mécanisme permettant d’identifier l’hedging stratégique dans les relations internationales est tout d’abord développé, se basant notamment sur les travaux de Tessman et comportant trois niveaux et cinq critères. Le premier critère nécessitant que le comportement soit stratégique, c’est-à-dire décidé au plus haut niveau par l’exécutif du pays, est validé par le discours de Moscou, identifiant souvent ses relations avec Hanoï et Pékin comme étant des principaux objectifs nationaux dans son agenda politique. Le deuxième niveau et ses deux critères concernent l’élimination dans le comportement du *hard balancing* et *bandwagoning*, ce qui est à nouveau accompli avec le cas d’étude. La Russie n’a pas formé d’alliance militaire avec le Vietnam et n’effectuant pas avec celui-ci d’exercices militaires en Mer de Chine méridionale. La Russie ne bandwagon pas non plus la Chine, n’ayant jamais soutenu dans son discours les revendications de Pékin dans la région, et ayant également fait preuve d’indépendance politique dans ses relations avec l’ASEAN. Le dernier niveau à l’inverse vise à identifier des éléments de *soft balancing* ainsi que de *soft alignment*, accomplis encore une fois par le comportement Russe. Moscou soft balance contre Pékin militairement ainsi que par l’hydrocarbure. La vente d’armes à Hanoï par Moscou a permis une modernisation complète de la flotte Vietnam en charge du territoire revendiqué au sein de la Mer de Chine méridionale, et l’exploration et l’exploitation par des compagnies Russe pour le compte d’Hanoï a également renforcé le poids politique du Vietnam dans la dispute. Moscou s’est également conjointement aligné avec Pékin, notamment en 2016 en critiquant la Cour permanente d’arbitrage et avec l’exercice militaire “Joint Sea 2016” dans son immédiat. L’étude a donc permis de confirmer l’hedging stratégique de Moscou envers Pékin dans la région, par le biais du Vietnam.

L'étude explique cela par plusieurs facteurs, notamment la présence croissante de la Chine en Asie Centrale et l'Arctique, et la dépendance grandissante de la Russie envers la Chine depuis 2014. La recherche en conclusion détermine que ces facteurs font de l'hedging stratégique un choix pertinent pour la Russie afin de minimiser sa dépendance politique envers Pékin sans non plus perdre le soutien indispensable de celle-ci.

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## **List of Appendices**

### **Appendix no. 1: System Structure, Conditioning Factors, and Strategic Choice (chart)**

Tessman, Brock F. "System Structure and State Strategy: Adding Hedging to the Menu."

*Security Studies* 21, no. 2 (April 2012): 196.

### **Appendix no. 2: Mechanism for Identifying Strategic Hedging Behavior (chart)**

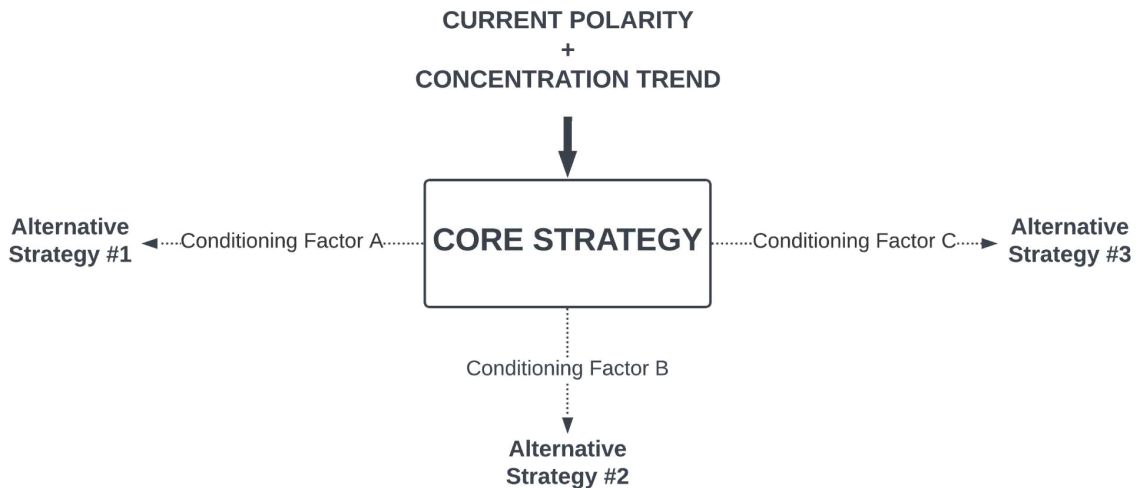
Tessman, Brock F. "System Structure and State Strategy: Adding Hedging to the Menu."

*Security Studies* 21, no. 2 (April 2012): 210.

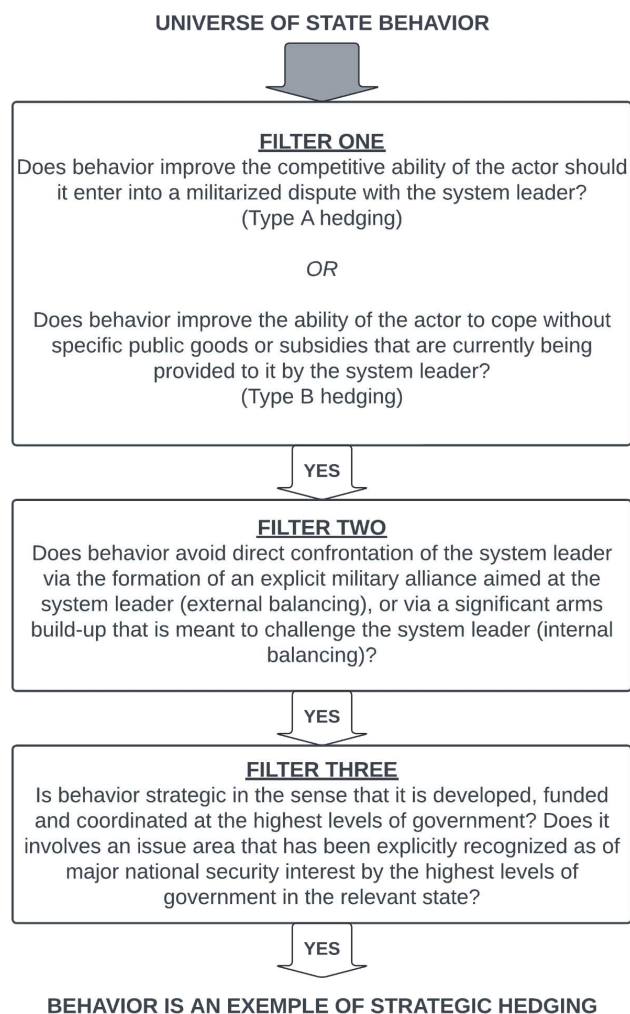
### **Appendix no. 3: Structural theory (chart)**

## Appendices

### Appendix no. 1: System Structure, Conditioning Factors, and Strategic Choice (chart)



### Appendix no. 2: Mechanism for Identifying Strategic Hedging Behavior (chart)



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