

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.