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ASEAN'S ADAPTIVE STRATEGY IN THE CONTEXT OF U.S.–CHINA COMPETITION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

A ESTRATÉGIA ADAPTATIVA DA ASEAN NO CONTEXTO DA COMPETIÇÃO ENTRE OS ESTADOS UNIDOS E A CHINA NO INDO-PACÍFICO

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Abstract
Amid intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China, Southeast Asian countries operating within the ASEAN institutional framework confront pressing imperatives to craft foreign policies that simultaneously safeguard national interests and prevent entrapment in the confrontation between the two superpowers. This article examines ASEAN's adoption of a "hedging" strategy as a dynamic model of flexible balancing, combining cooperation and counterbalance to preserve strategic autonomy, strengthen internal capacity, and sustain regional stability. Drawing upon international relations theory and empirical evidence from ASEAN documents, speeches, and member states' policy statements, the study develops an analytical framework structured around four key pillars of hedging: Blunting, understood as the enhancement of defense capabilities; Broadening, reflected in the diversification of strategic partnerships; Boosting, manifested in the reinforcement of multilateral institutions; and Binding, expressed through the advancement of common interests with both major powers. Three case studies: Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia, are employed to illustrate the diversity of approaches and the practical implementation of hedging strategies among ASEAN members. The analysis demonstrates that hedging constitutes a pragmatic and adaptive response, enabling ASEAN to avoid dependency on or direct confrontation with any great power. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal persistent challenges, including internal divisions, external

Resumo
Em meio à intensificação da competição estratégica entre os Estados Unidos e a China, os países do Sudeste Asiático que atuam dentro do quadro institucional da ASEAN enfrentam imperativos urgentes para formular políticas externas que simultaneamente protejam os interesses nacionais e evitem o aprisionamento na confrontação entre as duas superpotências. Este artigo examina a adoção, pela ASEAN, de uma estratégia de "hedging" como um modelo dinâmico de equilíbrio flexível, combinando cooperação e contrapeso para preservar a autonomia estratégica, fortalecer a capacidade interna e sustentar a estabilidade regional. Com base na teoria das relações internacionais e em evidências empíricas extraídas de documentos da ASEAN, discursos e declarações de política dos Estados membros, o estudo desenvolve um quadro analítico estruturado em torno de quatro pilares centrais do hedging: Blunting, entendido como o aprimoramento das capacidades de defesa; Broadening, refletido na diversificação das parcerias estratégicas; Boosting, manifestado no reforço das instituições multilaterais; e Binding, expresso pelo avanço de interesses comuns com ambas as grandes potências. Três estudos de caso — Vietnã, Singapura e Malásia — são utilizados para ilustrar a diversidade de abordagens e a implementação prática das estratégias de hedging entre os membros da ASEAN. A análise demonstra que o hedging constitui uma resposta pragmática e adaptativa, permitindo à ASEAN evitar dependência ou confronto direto com qualquer grande potência. No entanto, os

pressures, and institutional constraints. The article concludes by recommending that ASEAN strengthen its collective strategic planning, enhance internal coordination, and expand multilateral cooperation in order to sustain its central role within the evolving regional architecture.

Keywords: ASEAN. Hedging Strategy. US–China Rivalry. Strategic Autonomy.

resultados também revelam desafios persistentes, incluindo divisões internas, pressões externas e limitações institucionais. O artigo conclui recomendando que a ASEAN fortaleça seu planejamento estratégico coletivo, melhore a coordenação interna e amplie a cooperação multilateral para sustentar seu papel central dentro da arquitetura regional em evolução.

Palavras-chave: *ASEAN. Estratégia de Hedging. Rivalidade EUA–China. Autonomia Estratégica.*

1 INTRODUCTION

The Asia–Pacific regional order has undergone profound transformations in recent decades, with strategic competition between the United States and China emerging as its defining feature. This rivalry extends beyond the military domain into economics, technology, international institutions, and political influence. China, propelled by its expanding capabilities and ambition to assert regional leadership, has advanced initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In parallel, the United States has reinforced its military presence, consolidated alliances, and promoted strategic frameworks such as the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." Within this contested environment, Southeast Asia occupies a pivotal geopolitical position, where each state confronts difficult choices in defining its foreign policy orientation.

For the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the central challenge is to preserve strategic autonomy, sustain regional stability, and avoid entrapment in direct confrontation or excessive dependence on either superpower. In response, ASEAN and its member states have increasingly embraced the practice of "hedging," broadly understood as risk-buffering or strategic balancing. Hedging does not signify absolute neutrality, nor does it imply full alignment with one camp. Rather, it represents a hybrid strategy that integrates cooperation and counterbalance, enabling states to benefit from engagement with both the United States and China while mitigating risks should one power adopt aggressive or unpredictable policies.

Although hedging is not a novel concept in international relations, its expression in Southeast Asia is distinctive. Vietnam and Singapore exemplify clear hedging behavior by engaging in security cooperation with the United States while simultaneously

cultivating strong economic ties with China. Malaysia and Thailand, by contrast, pursue more flexible and nuanced forms of hedging. Despite the absence of an officially articulated "ASEAN hedging strategy," a discernible pattern emerges in member states' foreign policies, rooted in ASEAN's principles of consensus, non-interference, and its central role in regional architecture.

This article seeks to elucidate the nature, structure, and effectiveness of ASEAN's hedging strategy amid intensifying U.S.–China competition. It argues that hedging constitutes a flexible and adaptive approach, yet one constrained by significant limitations, particularly during crises when states may be compelled to take sides or when ASEAN struggles with internal divisions. To advance this argument, the study addresses the following research question: **how does ASEAN practice hedging to balance between the United States and China while maintaining strategic autonomy and centrality in the regional architecture?** In pursuing this inquiry, the article focuses on three dimensions: first, analyzing the theoretical foundations and diverse manifestations of hedging in foreign policy; second, clarifying the institutional, economic, military, and domestic political factors shaping ASEAN's hedging capacity; and third, assessing practical implementation through three selected country cases: Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia, thereby identifying strengths, weaknesses, and future prospects of this strategy.

From a theoretical perspective, the study adopts an integrative approach that combines neorealism, constructivism, and regional institutionalism to explain the behavior of Southeast Asian states amid great-power competition. Methodologically, it employs qualitative analysis based on secondary sources, including ASEAN's official documents, speeches, policy reports, and academic literature. This is complemented by comparative case study analysis of three countries, highlighting contrasts and identifying common patterns.

Through this approach, the study not only systematizes the concept of hedging within the regional context but also provides practical insights into ASEAN's foreign policy behavior in an era of global strategic rivalry.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Hedging in international relations is often contrasted with balancing, bandwagoning, and strategic ambiguity. Balancing emphasizes countering threats

through defense build-up or alliances (Roy, 2005), but risks polarization. Bandwagoning entails alignment with a stronger power for benefits, yet undermines autonomy, as seen in Cambodia and Laos' economic dependence on China (Roy, 2005). Strategic ambiguity relies on deliberately vague positions to delay commitments (Kuik, 2020), but remains rhetorical. Hedging, by comparison, integrates cooperation and prevention, borrowing deterrence from balancing, benefits from bandwagoning, and flexibility from ambiguity, while institutionalizing these into concrete actions such as defense strengthening, diversified partnerships, and multilateral engagement (Goh, 2006). For ASEAN, this hybrid strategy is optimal, sustaining cooperation while mitigating risks and reinforcing regional autonomy.

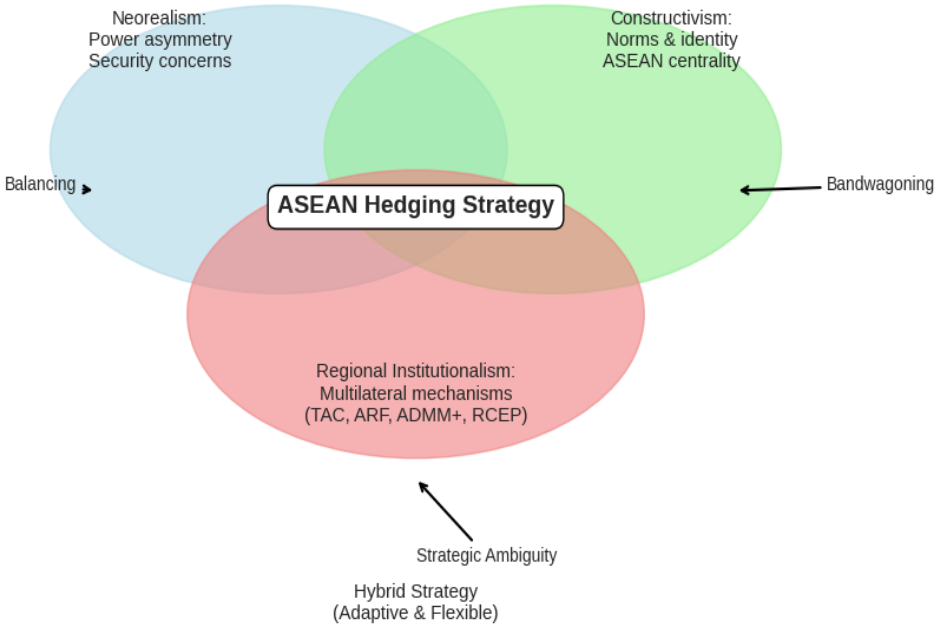
To explain ASEAN's hedging behavior, three theoretical approaches are commonly applied. Neorealism highlights structural asymmetries and the logic of survival in an anarchic system (Waltz, 1979), framing hedging as adaptation to China's rise and U.S. alliances. Constructivism emphasizes norms and identity, showing how ASEAN's principles of consensus and non-interference underpin "strategic autonomy" and "centrality" (Wendt, 1992). Regional institutionalism underscores the role of multilateral frameworks such as TAC, ARF, and ADMM+ in diffusing pressures and sustaining cooperation (Keohane, 1984). Each approach has limitations, but together they provide a multidimensional explanation: power dynamics, identity-driven responses, and institutional mechanisms.

The literature on hedging in Southeast Asia has evolved along three lines: conceptualization, country case studies, and institutional analyses. Foundational works by Goh (2006) and Kuik (2008) define hedging as a hybrid strategy distinct from neutrality, while later studies highlight "omni-enmeshment" as a way to draw great powers into multilateral structures. Country-level research focuses on Vietnam's "multilateralization–diversification" strategy (Thayer, 2011; Vuving, 2012), Singapore's dual engagement in defense and finance (Singh; Chong), Malaysia's soft hedging (Kuik), and Thailand's oscillation between alliance and economic dependence. Other cases, including Indonesia's "principled hedging," the Philippines' oscillation under Duterte, and Myanmar's pre-2021 dual reliance, broaden the spectrum. At the institutional level, scholars such as Acharya (2014), Ba, Emmers, and Haacke emphasize ASEAN's "institutional hedging" through mechanisms like TAC, ARF, ADMM+, and RCEP.

Recent studies caution that hedging may falter under crises such as South China Sea disputes or U.S.–China trade tensions, exposing risks of internal division.

Figure 1

ASEAN Headging Strategy



Despite these contributions, research gaps remain. Conceptual ambiguity persists, with overlaps between hedging, soft balancing, and strategic ambiguity. Empirical studies are largely qualitative, lacking systematic comparative or quantitative frameworks. The focus on Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia leaves other ASEAN members underexplored, while institutional hedging has not been fully theorized. Moreover, new challenges-non-traditional security, technological competition, and climate change, are insufficiently integrated into hedging analyses.

This article seeks to address these gaps by developing a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates neorealism, constructivism, and regional institutionalism, expanding analysis to both national and regional levels. By systematizing concepts, refining theory, and incorporating diverse cases, the study contributes to clarifying

hedging as ASEAN's key instrument for preserving strategic autonomy and centrality amid intensifying U.S.–China competition.

3 ASEAN'S STRATEGIC POSITION IN THE CONTEXT OF U.S.–CHINA COMPETITION

The rivalry between the United States and China has become the most consequential structural dynamic shaping the Asia–Pacific order in the twenty-first century. Initially centered on military balance, this competition has expanded into economics, technology, international institutions, and political influence, forming a multidimensional confrontation that is both direct and latent. Each domain interacts with the others, creating a cycle of escalation that reshapes the regional landscape and forces smaller states, particularly those in Southeast Asia, to adopt adaptive strategies. ASEAN, situated at the crossroads of this rivalry, embodies both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of middle and small powers navigating great-power competition.

From a military-security perspective, Washington continues to uphold global dominance through its naval and air power and its extensive alliance network. Beijing, however, has accelerated military modernization, particularly in naval expansion, missile development, and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. These advances aim to restrict U.S. operational freedom in the Western Pacific, especially around the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. The clash between freedom of navigation operations and China's sovereignty claims creates persistent risks of confrontation, with littoral ASEAN states such as Vietnam and the Philippines directly exposed to potential conflict (Friedberg, 2011, p. 27).

Economically, the bilateral relationship has shifted from interdependence to confrontation. For decades, the "competition in cooperation" model allowed both economies to grow together. Yet the trade war since 2018 revealed structural tensions, with Washington imposing tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars of Chinese goods and Beijing retaliating in kind. This escalation reflects not merely tactical disputes but a deeper structural shift toward selective decoupling, particularly in sectors tied to national security (Bown & Kolb, 2021, p. 14). ASEAN, heavily integrated into global supply chains, is both a beneficiary of investment and a casualty of disruption, as export-dependent economies such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand face volatility.

Technology has emerged as the decisive frontier. While military power defined the twentieth century, high technology, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, 5G networks, and space capabilities, has become the foundation of national power in the twenty-first. The United States seeks to preserve leadership by restricting critical exports and tightening supply chain controls, while China pursues self-sufficiency through initiatives such as "Made in China 2025." The Huawei–U.S. rivalry over 5G infrastructure epitomizes this struggle, intertwining cybersecurity, global norms, and commercial interests (Segal, 2020, p. 112). For ASEAN, technological choices are not merely commercial but strategic, as decisions on infrastructure deployment shape long-term dependence and security vulnerabilities.

Institutional competition further reflects the clash of visions. Washington continues to lead postwar institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, while promoting frameworks like the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." Beijing, in turn, has advanced parallel institutions including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and RCEP, the world's largest trade agreement with China at its center (Foot & King, 2019, p. 74). These institutional initiatives are not neutral; they embody competing normative orders, one emphasizing liberal-democratic values, the other promoting state-led development. ASEAN, positioned between these frameworks, must balance participation without losing autonomy.

Diplomatically, the United States strengthens alliances through NATO, Quad, and AUKUS, while China expands influence via economic diplomacy, aid, and infrastructure investment. In Southeast Asia, this competition manifests in divergent alignments: some states lean toward Beijing for economic cooperation, while others rely on Washington for security guarantees. This divergence threatens ASEAN's principle of consensus, undermining its ability to present a unified stance on sensitive issues (Acharya, 2014, p. 66).

ASEAN's strategic position is further shaped by geography, economics, and institutional structure. Geographically, the region controls critical maritime routes such as the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok, which carry nearly 40% of global trade (Kaplan, 2010, p. 97). This makes Southeast Asia indispensable to both Washington's maritime strategy and Beijing's concerns about strategic blockade. Economically, ASEAN's combined GDP of nearly US$4 trillion and its role as the world's fifth-largest economy make it both a beneficiary and a casualty of U.S.–China competition (Asian

Development Bank, 2022, p. 134). China is ASEAN's largest trading partner, while the United States remains a critical export market and technology investor. This dual dependence creates opportunities for diversification but also risks of vulnerability, particularly debt traps from Chinese infrastructure loans or instability from U.S. decoupling. Institutionally, ASEAN's principles of consensus, non-interference, and centrality, supported by mechanisms such as TAC, ARF, EAS, and ADMM+, provide platforms for dialogue and coordination (Beeson, 2019, p. 459). Yet institutional limits are evident: consensus often prevents decisive action, as seen in Cambodia's resistance to joint statements on the South China Sea, while the rise of extra-regional mechanisms such as Quad and AUKUS threatens ASEAN's relevance if it fails to adapt.

This environment places ASEAN in a strategic dilemma: absolute neutrality is impossible, yet openly choosing sides is perilous. Neutrality falters because member states' interests are deeply intertwined with both powers—coastal states threatened by China's maritime claims seek U.S. support, while mainland states dependent on Chinese investment lean toward Beijing. Open alignment, however, risks confrontation, economic loss, or internal division. Consequently, ASEAN adopts hedging as a pragmatic middle path. Operationalized through the "4B" framework (Kuik, 2008, p. 164)—Blunting (defense modernization and selective security cooperation), Broadening (diversifying partnerships with Japan, India, Australia, and the EU), Boosting (strengthening multilateral institutions such as ARF and ADMM+), and Binding (creating shared interests with both powers through mechanisms like RCEP or climate cooperation)—hedging allows ASEAN to delay choices, benefit from both powers, and retain flexibility.

Country cases illustrate this diversity: Vietnam combines "multilateralization–diversification" with its "three no's" defense policy (Vuving, 2012, p. 34); Singapore balances U.S. defense procurement with its role as a financial hub for China; Malaysia prioritizes economic ties with Beijing while maintaining minimal defense dialogue with Washington. These examples confirm that neutrality is nominal, while hedging is the substantive practice. Yet hedging carries costs. Ambiguity risks ASEAN being perceived as indecisive, undermining credibility. Internal divisions weaken consensus and centrality, while resources are diverted toward preventive diplomacy rather than internal development (Beeson, 2019, p. 459). Nevertheless, in current conditions, hedging remains the most viable option. It allows ASEAN to benefit from both powers, sustain multilateral dialogue, and gradually enhance strategic autonomy. As Kuik (2020, p. 514)

emphasizes, hedging is the optimal adaptive strategy for small and middle powers in uncertain contexts, enabling them to exploit opportunities while avoiding direct confrontation.

In sum, ASEAN's strategic position is defined by its geography, economic interdependence, and institutional framework, all of which expose it to both opportunities and vulnerabilities in the U.S.–China rivalry. Absolute neutrality is unattainable, and open alignment is perilous. Hedging, despite its ambiguities, emerges as the only pragmatic path to balance interests, preserve autonomy, and uphold regional stability. The paradox of "not being absolutely neutral but also not openly choosing sides" encapsulates the essence of ASEAN's art of balancing between two poles of power that are reshaping the twenty-first-century order.

4 THE ART OF HEDGING: ASEAN'S ADAPTIVE STRATEGY

ASEAN's hedging strategy is best understood as a collective foreign policy approach shaped by the region's geopolitical realities, economic interdependence, and institutional framework. Since its founding in 1967, ASEAN has sought to balance three overarching goals: ensuring security, sustaining economic development, and preserving strategic autonomy in an international environment increasingly defined by U.S.–China rivalry. The principles of non-interference and consensus, institutionalized in the 1971 ZOPFAN Declaration, the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and the 2008 ASEAN Charter, provide the normative foundation for ASEAN's diplomacy. While absolute neutrality has proven unattainable, these principles have enabled ASEAN to maintain cohesion and resist polarization under external pressure.

ASEAN's collective foreign policy is pragmatic and flexible, reflecting the organization's "small but not weak" character. Rather than confronting major powers directly, ASEAN has embraced institutional hedging, a hybrid strategy that combines cooperation and prevention. Hedging allows ASEAN to exploit economic and technological benefits from both China and the United States while simultaneously maintaining security channels to minimize risks (Kuik, 2008, p. 164). At the collective level, this is manifested in ASEAN's persistent promotion of multilateral mechanisms, which create strategic space for member states and slow the momentum toward confrontation.

The literature on hedging in Southeast Asia has evolved significantly. Foundational works by Evelyn Goh (2006) and Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2008) conceptualize hedging as a hybrid strategy distinct from neutrality, while later studies highlight "omni-enmeshment" as a way to draw great powers into multilateral structures. Country-level analyses emphasize Vietnam's "multilateralization–diversification" strategy (Thayer, 2011; Vuving, 2012), Singapore's dual engagement in defense and finance (Singh; Chong), Malaysia's soft hedging (Kuik), and Thailand's oscillation between alliance and economic dependence. Other cases, including Indonesia's "principled hedging," the Philippines' oscillation under Duterte, and Myanmar's pre-2021 dual reliance, broaden the spectrum of hedging practices. At the institutional level, scholars such as Acharya (2014), Ba, Emmers, and Haacke emphasize ASEAN's "institutional hedging" through mechanisms like TAC, ARF, ADMM+, and RCEP. More recent studies caution that hedging may falter under crises such as South China Sea disputes or U.S.–China trade tensions, exposing risks of internal division.

The theoretical foundations of ASEAN's hedging strategy draw from three complementary approaches. Neorealism highlights structural asymmetries and the logic of survival in an anarchic system (Waltz, 1979), framing hedging as adaptation to China's rise and U.S. alliances. Constructivism emphasizes norms and identity, showing how ASEAN's principles of consensus and non-interference underpin "strategic autonomy" and "centrality" (Wendt, 1992). Regional institutionalism underscores the role of multilateral frameworks in diffusing pressures and sustaining cooperation (Keohane, 1984). Each approach has limitations—neorealism's material bias, constructivism's voluntarism, and institutionalism's effectiveness gap—but together they provide a multidimensional explanation of ASEAN's hedging behavior.

ASEAN's hedging strategy is operationalized through the "4B" framework (Kuik, 2008, p. 164). Blunting refers to defense modernization and selective security cooperation, exemplified by Vietnam and Singapore's investments in military capabilities and partnerships with the United States. Broadening entails diversifying partnerships with Japan, India, Australia, and the EU, reducing dependence on any single power. Boosting reflects ASEAN's efforts to strengthen multilateral institutions such as ARF, ADMM+, and EAS, reinforcing its role as a hub for dialogue. Binding involves creating shared interests with both powers, such as participation in RCEP or cooperation on climate change, thereby intertwining ASEAN's future with both Washington and Beijing.

Despite its adaptability, ASEAN's hedging strategy faces persistent challenges. The principle of consensus, while preventing deep divisions, often hampers decisive action, as seen in the 2012 failure to issue a joint communiqué on the South China Sea. Internal divisions between mainland and maritime states weaken ASEAN's collective voice, while external pressures from competing mechanisms such as Quad and AUKUS threaten its centrality. Hedging also risks being perceived as indecisive, undermining credibility and diverting resources toward preventive diplomacy rather than internal development (Beeson, 2019, p. 459).

Nevertheless, hedging remains ASEAN's most viable option. Absolute neutrality is unattainable, and open alignment is perilous. Hedging allows ASEAN to benefit from both powers, sustain multilateral dialogue, and gradually enhance strategic autonomy. As Kuik (2020, p. 514) emphasizes, hedging is the optimal adaptive strategy for small and middle powers in uncertain contexts, enabling them to exploit opportunities while avoiding direct confrontation. In this sense, ASEAN's hedging strategy is both a reflection of structural constraints and a demonstration of agency, embodying the art of balancing in a contested regional order.

5 COUNTRY CASE STUDIES IN ASEAN HEDGING STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

The diversity of ASEAN's hedging strategies can be clearly seen through the cases of Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia. Each country applies the 4B framework of hedging, Blunting, Broadening, Binding, and Boosting, in ways that reflect their specific geopolitical conditions, economic structures, and institutional capacities. By examining these three cases in detail, it becomes evident how ASEAN members adapt hedging to maintain autonomy and balance in the context of intensifying U.S.–China competition.

Vietnam is a typical example of a middle-sized country that applies hedging comprehensively and flexibly. With its geo-strategic position in Southeast Asia and a long history of dealing with neighboring powers, Vietnam has developed a foreign policy approach of "not choosing sides but not being absolutely neutral." In the security and defense domain, Vietnam implements the "four no's" policy as affirmed in the 2019 Defense White Paper: no participation in military alliances, no alliance with one country to fight another, no foreign military bases in Vietnam, and no use of force or threat of

force in international relations. At the same time, Vietnam added the element of "being able to consider developing necessary defense-military relations in accordance with national interests" (Ministry of National Defense of Vietnam, 2019, p. 23). This demonstrates the flexibility of hedging, both blunting risks through strengthening self-defense capabilities and boosting international prestige by participating in UN peacekeeping forces. Diplomatically, Vietnam applies diversification and multilateralization, maintaining a "comprehensive strategic partnership" with China while upgrading its relationship with the United States to the same level in 2023 and expanding cooperation with Japan, India, Russia, South Korea, Australia and many others (Thayer, 2020, p. 18). Economically, Vietnam participates in agreements linked to the West such as CPTPP and EVFTA, while also joining RCEP where China plays a central role (Nguyen & Qiu, 2021, p. 145). This reflects both binding and broadening, linking the interests of major powers to Vietnam's market while diversifying relations to avoid over-dependence. Regionally, Vietnam has promoted ASEAN centrality and international law, firmly maintaining its stance on resolving disputes peacefully and based on UNCLOS 1982. As ASEAN Chair in 2020, Vietnam sought to unify the bloc on the South China Sea issue despite differences among members (Vuving, 2020, p. 67). However, Vietnam's hedging faces challenges, including high trade dependence on China, and limited defense capacity. Storey (2021) notes that Vietnam is trying to maintain a delicate balance, but the risk of "tilting" to one side will increase if regional tensions escalate (p. 39).

Singapore represents a different logic of hedging, one based on institutions and economic centrality. With a small territory and population but the most developed economy in Southeast Asia, Singapore understands that its survival depends on maintaining an open, stable, and rules-based order. Its hedging is therefore proactive, designed not only to prevent risks but also to secure an external environment favorable to prosperity. A prominent feature of Singapore's policy is leveraging its special security relationship with the United States to create deterrence while maintaining friendly diplomatic and economic relations with China. The United States is a key security partner, with permanent military presence through agreements that allow U.S. forces access to Singapore's strategic infrastructure (Tan, 2017, p. 218). This is binding, intentionally tying the United States to Southeast Asian security without establishing a formal alliance. Economically, Singapore maintains close ties with China, its largest trading partner and

a leading source of investment, while participating in Belt and Road Initiative projects to consolidate its role as a financial and logistics hub (Chong, 2019, p. 77). This is broadening, as Singapore diversifies partners to benefit from China's rise while maintaining cooperation with Japan, India, and the EU. Institutionally, Singapore promotes regional integration through the ASEAN Economic Community and RCEP, and in the security field it initiated and maintains the Shangri-La Dialogue, a high-level forum for strategic exchange in the Asia-Pacific (Leong, 2020, p. 132). These efforts exemplify boosting, enhancing ASEAN's centrality and Singapore's influence through institutional diplomacy. Domestically, Singapore implements the Total Defence policy, integrating military, economic, social, psychological, and cyber dimensions, which reflects blunting by strengthening resilience and deterrence. Yet Singapore faces challenges, including dependence on trade with China, awkward positioning in U.S.–China confrontations, and limited capacity to shape the regional security architecture compared to mechanisms such as AUKUS or Quad (Han, 2021, p. 59). Nevertheless, Singapore has achieved a high level of success in applying hedging, flexibly adjusting U.S.–China relations, exploiting its role as a financial hub, and proactively leading institutions to maintain autonomy and amplify influence beyond its territorial size.

Malaysia illustrates a softer but pragmatic hedging model shaped by its control of the Strait of Malacca and direct interests in the South China Sea. Kuala Lumpur maintains close economic relations with China, its largest trading partner and investor in infrastructure projects, while simultaneously diversifying relations with the United States, Japan, India, and the EU to minimize risks (Kuik, 2016, p. 504). This reflects broadening. In security, Malaysia adopts a cautious approach. Despite sovereignty disputes with China, it rarely speaks out strongly or internationalizes the issue, instead focusing on bilateral dialogue while maintaining patrol presence and strengthening maritime surveillance. This reflects blunting, minimizing direct conflict by limiting open confrontation but not accepting Chinese dominance (Rahim, 2019, p. 89). With the United States, Malaysia cooperates on counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and joint military exercises, but maintains the principle of "no military alliances." This is selective binding, tying the United States to regional security without allowing Washington to directly shape Malaysia's defense strategy (Jones, 2020, p. 146). Institutionally, Malaysia has actively utilized ASEAN to increase its influence and reduce pressure from great-power competition. As ASEAN Chair in 2015, Malaysia promoted initiatives to strengthen

"strategic balance" and opposed Southeast Asia being turned into a geopolitical battlefield. This is boosting, using ASEAN as an institutional shield against external pressures (Khong, 2017, p. 37). A notable feature of Malaysia's hedging is its continuity across successive governments. Despite frequent political changes, the orientation of "not choosing sides" has remained consistent, forming a strategic consensus in Malaysian politics (Ahmad, 2021, p. 54). However, Malaysia faces limitations, including heavy trade dependence on China, perceived indecisiveness in the South China Sea, and limited defense capabilities. Storey (2020) argues that these constraints shape Malaysia's hedging in a "softer" direction compared to its neighbors (p. 41).

Taken together, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia illustrate the diversity of ASEAN hedging strategies. Vietnam emphasizes sovereignty and maritime security through soft balancing and diversification. Singapore leverages economic centrality and institutional leadership to amplify influence. Malaysia adopts a softer, pragmatic model balancing economic engagement with cautious security measures. These cases demonstrate that hedging is not a uniform strategy but a flexible framework adapted to national conditions. Collectively, they reinforce ASEAN's strategic flexibility, enabling the bloc to sustain autonomy and centrality amid intensifying U.S.–China competition.

6 CONCLUSION

In the context of the increasingly deep and comprehensive strategic competition between the United States and China, ASEAN's hedging strategy has emerged as one of the most pragmatic, flexible, and adaptive policy options available to small and middle powers in Southeast Asia. Hedging is not simply a defensive posture designed to avoid risks but rather a complex and multidimensional strategic structure. By applying the four pillars of Blunting, Broadening, Boosting, and Binding, ASEAN countries have been able to simultaneously exploit opportunities from both superpowers while maintaining strategic autonomy and reinforcing ASEAN's central role in the regional order.

Blunting refers to the effort to strengthen self-defense capabilities and minimize vulnerabilities without provoking direct confrontation. Vietnam's independent defense policy and Singapore's Total Defence model are clear examples of this pillar, where national resilience is enhanced to reduce exposure to external pressure. Broadening reflects the diversification of partnerships and economic relations, allowing ASEAN

members to disperse risks and expand strategic space. Vietnam's participation in both Western-oriented agreements such as CPTPP and EVFTA and China-centered RCEP, as well as Malaysia's diversification of trade and investment partners, illustrate this approach. Boosting highlights the use of multilateral institutions and diplomacy to amplify influence and reinforce ASEAN centrality. Singapore's leadership in initiatives such as the ASEAN Economic Community and the Shangri-La Dialogue, together with Malaysia's emphasis on ASEAN as an institutional shield, demonstrate how institutional hedging can bind major powers into cooperative frameworks. Binding refers to the deliberate creation of intertwined interests with both the United States and China, ensuring that neither power can easily disengage from the region. Vietnam's comprehensive partnerships, Singapore's facilitation of U.S. military access, and Malaysia's selective security cooperation with Washington all exemplify this pillar.

Institutional hedging has become a particularly distinctive tool for ASEAN. By embedding both superpowers into multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and RCEP, ASEAN has sought to prevent marginalization and maintain its centrality even as new security structures like the Quad and AUKUS emerge. This institutional approach reflects ASEAN's collective foreign policy tradition of consensus and non-interference, which, although limited in decisiveness, provides a framework for cohesion and resilience against external pressures.

At the national level, the cases of Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia highlight the diversity of hedging practices. Vietnam applies a "multilateralization–diversification" model that emphasizes sovereignty protection and maritime security. Singapore pursues an active hedging model that leverages its economic centrality and institutional leadership to amplify influence beyond its territorial size. Malaysia adopts a softer and pragmatic hedging model that balances economic engagement with China and cautious security cooperation with the United States while relying heavily on ASEAN institutions. This diversity reflects the different geopolitical contexts, economic interests, and foreign policy traditions of each country, affirming that hedging is not a rigid formula but a customizable spectrum of policies.

Despite its strengths, ASEAN's hedging strategy faces significant limitations. The principle of consensus, which underpins ASEAN's institutional framework, often becomes a barrier when member states have conflicting interests, as seen in disagreements over the South China Sea. Hedging also depends on a manageable competitive

environment. If U.S.–China tensions escalate into full-scale conflict, ASEAN's ability to postpone choices and maintain ambiguity will be severely constrained. Prolonged reliance on strategic ambiguity risks undermining ASEAN's credibility, particularly if the organization fails to demonstrate effective coordination and genuine centrality. Furthermore, the rise of non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and technological competition requires ASEAN to adjust its hedging strategy to encompass cross-sectoral issues rather than focusing narrowly on traditional power relations.

Overall, ASEAN's hedging strategy has made an important contribution to maintaining regional stability. It has allowed the bloc to take advantage of opportunities from both the United States and China while safeguarding strategic autonomy. To ensure sustainability, ASEAN must continue consolidating internal strength, strengthening multilateral institutions, and improving coordination capacity to preserve centrality in the Asia-Pacific order. In the long term, combining hedging with institutional reforms, such as enhancing the effectiveness of consensus mechanisms and expanding security cooperation, will be decisive in determining ASEAN's ability to maintain its central role amid unpredictable shifts in U.S.–China competition and the evolving international order of the twenty-first century.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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