

THE EVOLUTION OF VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY THROUGH THE LENS OF HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

TRAN QUANG VU*

Discipline: Political Science (International Relations)

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Abstract

Since 1986, amid the profound transformations following the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnam's foreign policy has undergone a comprehensive recalibration to safeguard sovereignty and deepen international integration. This article investigates how Vietnam has maintained its core principles while demonstrating adaptability to regional and global changes. Drawing upon Historical Institutionalism (HI) and process-tracing methodology, it analyzes Party documents, policy archives, and scholarly literature to explain this trajectory. The study identifies two major phases: 1986–1995, a critical juncture of conversion, where independence and self-reliance were reinterpreted to legitimize multilateralism and the normalization of relations with ASEAN, China, and the United States; and 1995–present, a phase of layering, characterized by the gradual incorporation of new approaches such as omnidirectional, four-nos, and “bamboo diplomacy” within existing frameworks. The findings highlight that Vietnam's foreign policy reflects both stability and innovation, a process of adaptive resilience that preserves strategic autonomy while embracing global change. This study contributes theoretically to understanding endogenous institutional evolution and empirically to explaining Vietnam's diplomatic modernization, offering insights for small and middle powers seeking to reconcile tradition with adaptation in an uncertain international order.

Keywords: Vietnam's foreign policy, historical institutionalism, path dependence, bamboo diplomacy, strategic autonomy.

1. Introduction

Following the end of the Cold War, the international landscape underwent dramatic transformation, prompting small and medium-sized states to recalibrate their

* Master's Student, School of International Studies, Nanjing University, China.
Email: tqv3120@gmail.com

foreign policy strategies. Amid this shifting geopolitical environment, Vietnam transitioned from a “one-sided” alignment with the Soviet Union to a more balanced approach of diversification and multilateralization. This transition not only reflects Vietnam’s pragmatic response to external change but also demonstrates its long-term strategic vision of protecting sovereignty and pursuing national development. In 1986, the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) launched the Đổi Mới (Renovation) reforms, initiating a broad transformation across economic, political, and diplomatic spheres. Since then, Vietnam has actively pursued diplomatic breakthroughs. Once isolated by decades of embargo, Vietnam has subsequently established diplomatic relations with 193 countries, building a multi-layered network of partnerships. Notably, Vietnam has developed strategic or comprehensive partnerships with all five permanent members of the UN Security Council and several G20 members, transforming itself into an active participant in the global arena (Chinh, 2024).

Research indicates that in the 21st century, Vietnam’s foreign policy has shifted from an ideology-driven orientation to one centered on national interests, using multilateral platforms to enhance its international standing. This transformation has been conceptualized as the “Vietnamese School of Diplomacy,” reflecting an effort to develop a localized theoretical framework (Thuy, 2022). Vietnamese scholars argue that this school draws upon Hồ Chí Minh’s diplomatic philosophy—a creative application of Marxism-Leninism to Vietnam’s conditions. Its main tenets include: (1) prioritizing national interests; (2) adhering to principles while flexibly adapting strategies (“dĩ bất biến, ứng biến”); (3) pursuing a policy of “making more friends and fewer enemies” through skillful diplomacy; and (4) combining domestic strength with global momentum through accurate situational assessment (Huan, n.d.).

The emphasis on national interests was first codified at the Third Diplomatic Conference in 1964 (CPV, 2000) and has since been reaffirmed in the 11th, 12th, and 13th Party Congresses (CPV, 2021). This consistency demonstrates a clear path-dependent logic in Vietnam’s diplomatic evolution. These long-standing principles later took shape in the modern metaphor of “Bamboo Diplomacy,” introduced by General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng in 2021 amid growing U.S.–China competition. The bamboo image—firm roots, resilient stems, and flexible branches—symbolizes Vietnam’s commitment to autonomy and adaptability (Na, 2023). Rather than representing a new doctrine, “Bamboo Diplomacy” embodies the enduring logic of the Vietnamese School of Diplomacy, now serving as its “official nomenclature” for adapting traditional principles to new realities. This paper employs Historical Institutionalism (HI) as the main analytical framework to explain the internal logic behind Vietnam’s foreign policy transformation. HI suggests that institutions evolve along established trajectories, with major changes triggered by “critical junctures” that redefine institutional rules (Thelen,

1999). Using this approach, Vietnam's foreign policy evolution can be divided into two phases:

Phase I (1986–1995): marked by *conversion-type change*, where the ideological framework was reinterpreted through the lens of national interest and multilateralism.

Phase II (1995–present): characterized by *layering-type change*, in which new practices, such as omnidirectional diplomacy and “Bamboo Diplomacy” were gradually added to existing structures.

To ensure analytical rigor, this study applies process-tracing, a qualitative method suited for uncovering causal mechanisms within case studies (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). By tracing how institutional adjustments emerged during critical junctures, the paper identifies the mechanisms through which Vietnam sustained a consistent foreign policy trajectory. Sources include CPV Congress documents, Party resolutions, government reports, and peer-reviewed academic works. The study defines two key turning points: the 1986 *Đổi Mới* reforms and the 1995 milestones of ASEAN accession and U.S. normalization. These events collectively established the institutional foundations of Vietnam's long-term diplomatic trajectory.

In summary, throughout the reform era, Vietnam has consistently upheld its foundational principles—*independence, sovereignty, and socialism*—while demonstrating flexibility in response to global shifts. This adaptability has been shaped by Vietnam's geopolitical position, development stage, and the evolving nature of its foreign relations. As Tu Thi Thoa (2025) observes, Vietnam's post-*Đổi Mới* diplomacy embodies a pragmatic orientation that prioritizes both economic growth and regime security. Similarly, Ngan et al. (2025) emphasize Vietnam's capacity to balance principles and adaptability, maximizing national interests while avoiding entanglement in great-power rivalry. This trajectory not only reflects national interests but also aligns with the Communist Party's broader conception of international responsibility (Nien, 2002).

In essence, Vietnam's diplomatic transformation illustrates a dynamic interplay between institutional continuity and strategic adaptation. It exemplifies how small and medium-sized states can sustain autonomy amid global uncertainty through a balance of stability and innovation.

2. Theoretical framework and analysis of institutional change

2.1. Path dependence

Historical Institutionalism emphasizes that institutional development is marked by a pronounced path-dependent nature – once a particular institutional trajectory is established, it tends to exert constraining effects on subsequent developments over an extended period. Paul Pierson (2000) argues that path dependence stems from a mechanism of “*increasing returns*”, whereby the utility of an initial choice escalates

over time, making the social cost of switching to alternative paths increasingly prohibitive. In the case of Vietnam, this logic is clearly observable in the consolidation of its foreign policy orientation following the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) reforms. Once the principle of “diversification and multilateralization” was adopted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the benefits of this choice gradually accumulated: expanded access to external markets, integration into ASEAN and subsequently the WTO, as well as the development of strategic partnerships – all of which reinforced the original commitment.

Crucially, Vietnam’s foreign policy has always been anchored in the immutable foundation of safeguarding national sovereignty and independence, while being closely tied to the comprehensive leadership of the Communist Party. Guided by Marxism–Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Thought, these principles serve as the compass for all external strategies. This is not only a basic political principle ensuring domestic legitimacy but also a source of “increasing returns” at the international level, as Vietnam is perceived as a steadfast, autonomous, and consistent actor. Conversely, the costs of abandoning this path, such as the loss of international credibility, reduced economic growth, damage to national independence and sovereignty, as well as to the political–ideological foundation – have become prohibitively high. Pierson’s concept of “increasing returns” thus helps explain why Vietnam, despite the turbulence of the global order and intensifying great-power competition, has remained committed to its chosen foreign policy.

This strategic clarity and its benefits stand in sharp contrast to the experience of Bangladesh, which highlights the high cost of strategic incoherence. Analysts argue that Bangladesh’s foreign policy has often lacked long-term planning and national consensus, instead being shaped by day-to-day politics and partisan priorities, resulting in strategic incoherence (Rahman, 2025). A concrete manifestation of this fragility occurred in April 2025, when India revoked a key transshipment facility – an arrangement that had enabled Bangladesh to export goods to third countries via Indian territory – citing logistical inefficiencies (Kumar, M., & Paul, R, 2025). At a deeper level, however, analysts note that India’s decision also reflected concerns over Bangladesh’s inconsistent foreign policy orientation, which has at times oscillated between courting Chinese and Indian interests without a clear long-term commitment (Jacob, 2025). This sudden policy shift not only significantly disrupted Bangladesh’s trade logistics and export competitiveness but also exposed critical vulnerabilities within its export-dependent economic sector. Amongst the hardest hit was the garment sector, which represented nearly 90% of the country’s total export turnover in 2023 (Hoang, 2024). Such incidents epitomize the dangers of deviating from a stable, principle-based foreign policy framework and, by counterexample, reinforce the value of the institutional continuity that Vietnam has managed to uphold. In other words, Dhaka’s

experience demonstrates that the absence of *increasing returns* not only deprives a state of cumulative strategic benefits, but also amplifies its exposure to costly external shocks.

Regarding the evolution of Vietnam's foreign policy, the principle of "national independence and primacy of national interest" constitutes a deeply embedded, path-dependent logic through the lens of Historical Institutionalism. This principle, which encompasses core elements such as sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and national unification, has shaped the country's external relations for decades. This logic was established during Vietnam's anti-colonial resistance against France and the United States and has been consistently maintained throughout the Cold War and into contemporary policy. Even during the height of the Cold War, Vietnam's alignment with the Soviet Union – the so-called "leaning to one side" strategy – was essentially a pragmatic response to the geopolitical constraints of the time. Rather than signalling unconditional ideological allegiance to the socialist bloc, this strategy functioned primarily as a means to safeguard national security, deter foreign aggression, and resist imperialist interference, particularly from the United States and its allies. *In other words, the Cold War-era "leaning to one side" strategy was not a deviation from this path, but rather a strategic adaptation to specific historical circumstances.* Thus, while ideological orientation may be the surface feature, the deeper logic lies in the pursuit of national autonomy and independence.

As noted by multiple Vietnamese scholars, although the overarching objective of Vietnam's foreign policy has consistently focused on national survival and development, the strategies and instruments adopted to achieve this goal have varied significantly across historical periods: from ideological alliances and strategic alignments to a more pragmatic policy emphasizing diversified diplomacy and economic cooperation (Trung, 2022). For instance, alignment with the Soviet Union, despite its ideological underpinnings, was also a realistic response to dual military and diplomatic pressures from both the United States and China. Another typical example of this adaptive yet principled approach is the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, a hallmark of the distinctive Vietnamese "Bamboo Diplomacy" – a school of thought that perfectly exemplifies the philosophy of "*remaining immutable*" (dĩ bất biến) to adapt to the "*ever-changing*" (ýng vạn biến). During the protracted negotiations, Vietnam combined military resilience with diplomatic skill, demonstrating flexibility while remaining steadfast to its core goals of independence, sovereignty, and unity (Kien & Tung, 2023). This historical episode underscores a consistent path dependence in Vietnamese diplomacy: national interest, rather than ideology, has always been the fundamental driver.

Furthermore, this path-dependent logic is also evident in Vietnam's foreign policy in the current era of increasing multipolarity. While institutional structures have evolved and external alignments have diversified, the core priority of safeguarding national independence and advancing national interests has remained consistent. Within

this enduring framework, Vietnam has continued to adapt to globalization while resisting external domination. Concretely, even as Vietnam has actively expanded strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, India, and others in recent years, it has firmly resisted being drawn into great-power confrontation. Vietnam upholds the principle of “*four no’s*”: no military alliances, no alignment with one country against another, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory, and no use or threat of force in international relations (Giang, 2022). This reflects the continuity of a stable national strategic core behind evolving diplomatic forms: *national sovereignty is non-negotiable, and national interests remain the highest priority, regardless of external pressure or systemic shifts*.

2.2. Critical junctures

A critical juncture refers to a period of institutional fluidity when established constraints relax and decisions have long-term consequences (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). For Vietnam, the 1986 *Đổi Mới* reforms represent a paradigmatic critical juncture. They not only reoriented economic policy but also redefined foreign relations – from ideological alignment to pragmatic engagement based on national interest.

By the late Cold War, Vietnam’s isolation, economic stagnation, and the Soviet bloc’s decline forced a comprehensive strategic reassessment. As former Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt remarked, “In a land surrounded by tigers and dragons, stagnation is the greatest threat to national security” (Allen, 1995). The urgency of reform thus extended beyond economics to foreign policy transformation.

As *Đổi Mới* progressed, ideology receded in importance while national interest became the primary guiding principle. Vietnam’s 1995 accession to ASEAN and normalization of relations with the U.S. marked another critical juncture, embedding multilateralism and diversification in institutional practice. If 1986 opened the door to transformation, 1995 consolidated it, locking in a new diplomatic trajectory within the regional and global system. The significance of these junctures lies not only in policy adoption but in institutionalization—the embedding of new norms, rules, and expectations that shape long-term strategic behavior. Vietnam’s dual milestones of 1986 and 1995 thus serve as anchors in understanding its durable path-dependent evolution.

2.3. Types of institutional change

Within Historical Institutionalism, institutional change typically occurs through four mechanisms: displacement, layering, conversion, and drift (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

- *Displacement* involves replacing old rules with new ones.
- *Layering* adds new rules on top of existing structures.

- *Conversion* reinterprets existing institutions for new purposes.
- *Drift* occurs when environmental shifts alter an institution's meaning without formal change.

Vietnam's foreign policy evolution demonstrates a hybrid of conversion and layering. The *Đổi Mới* reforms are better understood not as a displacement of ideology but as conversion—a reinterpretation of enduring principles such as independence and sovereignty through a pragmatic, national-interest lens. From 1995 onward, Vietnam entered a layering phase, incrementally adding new frameworks—economic diplomacy, comprehensive partnerships, and “bamboo diplomacy”—to the existing foundation of diversification and self-reliance. These layers deepened institutional resilience and adaptability without overturning the core doctrine. This process is summarized below:

Table 2.1 Typology of Institutional Change in Vietnam's Foreign Policy Evolution

Period	Type of Changes	Key Features
1986–1995	Conversion	Reinterpretation of core principles to justify multilateralism; normalization with China, Russia, and the U.S.; ASEAN accession
1995–Present	Layering	Gradual institutional addition – comprehensive and omnidirectional diplomacy – on the foundation of sovereignty and independence

Source: Author's compilation using data from Mahoney and Thelen (2010)

In comparative perspective, Cuba's experience after the Soviet collapse exemplifies drift—passive adaptation with minimal institutional reform, leading to severe economic contraction (Pérez-López, 1998). Between 1989 and 1995, Cuba's GDP declined by over 30%. In contrast, Vietnam's proactive combination of conversion and layering enabled robust growth, with GDP per capita rising from \$98 in 1990 to over \$3,500 in 2020 (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.). This contrast underscores the effectiveness of Vietnam's adaptive institutional strategy—reform within continuity—as a model for resilience in small and medium-sized states.

3. Findings and discussions

3.1. The sequential evolution of Vietnam's foreign policy

A critical juncture and conversion-type institutional change

The year 1986 marked the first major critical juncture in Vietnam's foreign policy transformation. With the collapse of the Soviet Union looming, declining aid, and domestic economic stagnation, Vietnam faced both internal and external crises. The ideologically driven, Soviet-aligned "one-sided" diplomacy of the pre-Đổi Mới era became unsustainable. Confronted with the imperatives of survival and development, Vietnam reinterpreted its long-held principles of independence and self-reliance through the pragmatic lens of national interest.

As Cold War structures loosened and Soviet assistance waned, Vietnam's leadership recognized that its traditional diplomatic model no longer served its survival needs. From a Historical Institutionalism perspective, this transformation represents a case of *conversion-type* change – where existing institutional principles are strategically repurposed for new goals rather than abandoned. Vietnam did not reject its revolutionary values but instead reinterpreted them to legitimize multilateralism and global integration. Several external pressures accelerated this process. The escalation of maritime tensions in the South China Sea – particularly the 1988 Johnson South Reef incident and China's 1992 Maritime Law – highlighted Vietnam's strategic vulnerability (Amer, 2002). These developments, coupled with waning Soviet support, made diplomatic diversification a strategic necessity. As Vietnamese scholar Phan Xuan Dung (2022) argues, path dependence on the principles of independence and self-reliance enabled continuity amid change. Post-1986, foreign policy shifted from ideology to pragmatism, positioning diplomacy as an instrument for economic recovery and national security. The 7th National Party Congress (1991) institutionalized this conversion by emphasizing multilateral engagement and proactive integration (CPV, 2007). In practice, this conversion manifested in several landmark moves:

- Restoration of relations with China (1991) – a pragmatic measure to stabilize borders and manage disputes.
- The 1994 Treaty on Basic Principles of Friendly Relations with Russia – reformulating a traditional alliance into a balanced, legal framework.
- Vietnam's accession to ASEAN and normalization with the U.S. (1995) – formalizing the shift from isolation to multilateralism.

Together, these actions embedded the principle of "diversification and multilateralization" as the cornerstone of Vietnam's modern diplomacy.

Economically, the outcomes of Đổi Mới reinforced this conversion. Between 1986–1990, GDP growth averaged 4.4%, accelerating to 8.2% in 1991–1995. Food insecurity dropped from 55% to 16.5% (Bộ Tài Chính, 2014; GSO, n.d.). These achievements created tangible "increasing returns" that institutionalized the converted trajectory – making reversal economically and politically costly. Through this lens, the 1986–1995 period represents the foundational phase of Vietnam's post–Cold War

diplomacy: a conversion of enduring revolutionary principles into an adaptive framework for international integration.

3.2. Institutional layering and the deepening of foreign policy (1995–present)

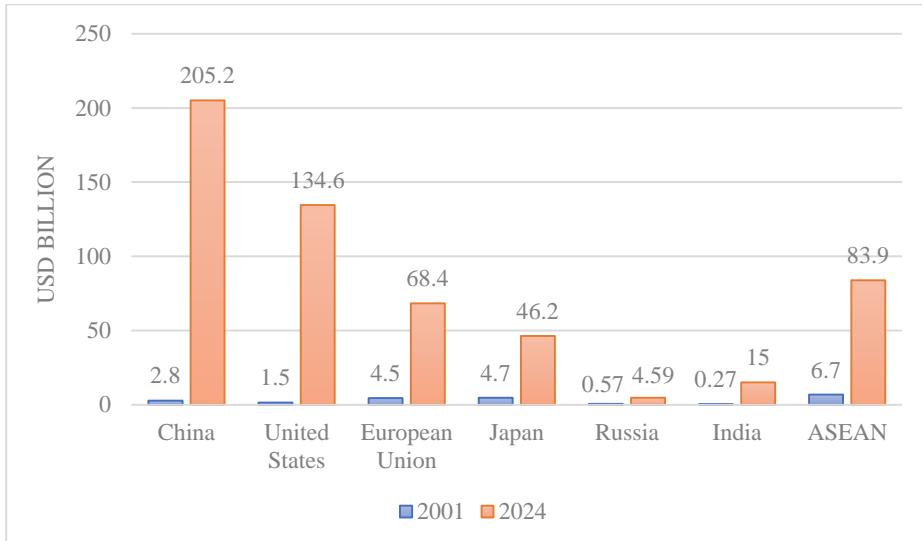
Since 1995, Vietnam's diplomacy has undergone layering-type institutional change. Rather than replacing existing principles, new ideas and practices have been added incrementally, reflecting a gradual deepening of multilateralism. The earlier conversion became the new institutional baseline, upon which successive adjustments were layered to respond to a complex and multipolar world.

After 1995, Vietnam entered a period of steady policy evolution, characterized by cumulative adaptation rather than rupture.

Core principles – independence, diversification, and self-reliance – remained intact, but new concepts such as *economic diplomacy*, *omnidirectional diplomacy*, and *bamboo diplomacy* were layered on top to reinforce flexibility and resilience. Vietnam's conduct in the South China Sea disputes illustrates this logic. While maintaining peaceful resolution and socialist solidarity, Hanoi introduced new institutional layers through legal diplomacy (e.g., the 1982 UNCLOS framework), regional mechanisms (e.g., the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea), and expanded security dialogues with the U.S., Japan, and India (Sang, 2022). This approach transformed path-dependent continuity into an instrument of hedging – maintaining sovereignty while avoiding entrapment in great-power rivalry.

Bureaucratic consistency has further reinforced this layered adaptation. Key institutions such as the CPV's External Relations Commission and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have served as custodians of policy stability. General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng's 2021 National Foreign Relations Conference reaffirmed the need to develop a modern diplomatic service “imbued with national identity” (Viet Nam News, 2021). This institutional continuity ensures coherence across shifting administrations, preventing abrupt strategic shifts. Economically, Vietnam has pursued layering through diversification of trade and investment frameworks. The expansion of bilateral and multilateral agreements – 17 FTAs and over 500 cooperation treaties – demonstrates how new economic structures were grafted onto existing foundations. The country's trade turnover reached \$800 billion in 2024, and cumulative FDI inflows exceeded \$440 billion (Trong, 2023). These incremental gains exemplify how layering deepens integration while preserving policy autonomy. Similarly, the development of thematic diplomatic initiatives such as “food diplomacy” during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis reflects Vietnam's ability to integrate sectoral priorities into its broader foreign policy framework. FAO recognition of Vietnam's contribution to global food security further enhanced its soft-power standing (Vietnam Agriculture Newspaper, 2023).

Figure 1 Comparative Analysis of Vietnam's Bilateral Trade with Major Partners: 2001 vs. 2024
(Unit: USD billion)



Source: Author's compilation using data from Vietnam Customs and Xinhua News Agency

At the strategic level, Vietnam upgraded multiple partnerships – most notably with the U.S., Japan, and South Korea – to *comprehensive strategic partnerships*. This institutionalized hedging approach minimizes dependency on any single power while strengthening Vietnam's agency within global governance structures. Empirically, this layering process has yielded measurable outcomes:

- 193 diplomatic relationships and 14 comprehensive strategic partners;
- Membership in over 70 international organizations (UN, ASEAN, WTO);
- Top 34 global economy with a GDP of \$476 billion (2024), projected to reach \$627 billion by 2029 (Lam, 2025).

From a Historical Institutionalism perspective, these results confirm that Vietnam's diplomacy has evolved through gradual institutional accretion rather than discontinuous change. Layering has enabled Vietnam to innovate within stability – absorbing external shocks while maintaining core autonomy. Even after the 12th and 13th Party Congresses, no major rupture occurred; instead, Vietnam refined its strategy to accommodate intensifying U.S.–China rivalry. Positioned at the crossroads of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), Vietnam leveraged its geopolitical centrality to maintain equilibrium (Nghi et al., 2025). This trajectory embodies what Nguyễn Phú Trọng (2023) describes as “seeking change

within stability.” Vietnam’s diplomacy continues to integrate new instruments – economic statecraft, multilateral engagement, and cultural diplomacy – into its long-established framework of independence and sovereignty.

In economic and strategic terms alike, Vietnam’s path demonstrates adaptive institutional layering: continuous innovation built upon enduring principles. This process has enhanced resilience, elevated Vietnam’s status as a proactive middle power, and validated the logic of historical institutionalism – that profound transformation can emerge from gradual, cumulative change.

4. Conclusion

From the lens of Historical Institutionalism, Vietnam’s post-Đổi Mới foreign policy exemplifies how profound transformation can arise from cumulative, path-dependent adaptation, rather than institutional rupture. Vietnam has not merely reacted to external shifts, but has actively reinterpreted its foundational principles – independence, self-reliance, and national interest – forging them into a pragmatic platform for multilateral engagement. Through processes of conversion and layering, continuity itself became a strategic resource, demonstrating that institutionally embedded stability can serve as a dynamic driver of innovation. This approach epitomizes an “institutionalized pragmatism,” where flexibility is cultivated not through departure from core norms, but through their deliberate and iterative refinement.

Conceptually, Vietnam’s trajectory enriches the understanding of small- and middle-power diplomacy within institutional theory. It transcends the conventional autonomy-integration binary by revealing how resilience is rooted in the capacity to institutionalize adaptability. The Vietnamese case – culminating in the “bamboo diplomacy” paradigm – showcases how domestic ideational legacies can forge distinctive international pathways despite global uncertainty. Ultimately, Vietnam’s evolution presents a persuasive model wherein continuity, reinterpreted at critical junctures, sustains national agency and cultivates innovative prowess in an age of strategic flux.

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